Rolling Stone
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ISSUE 1362

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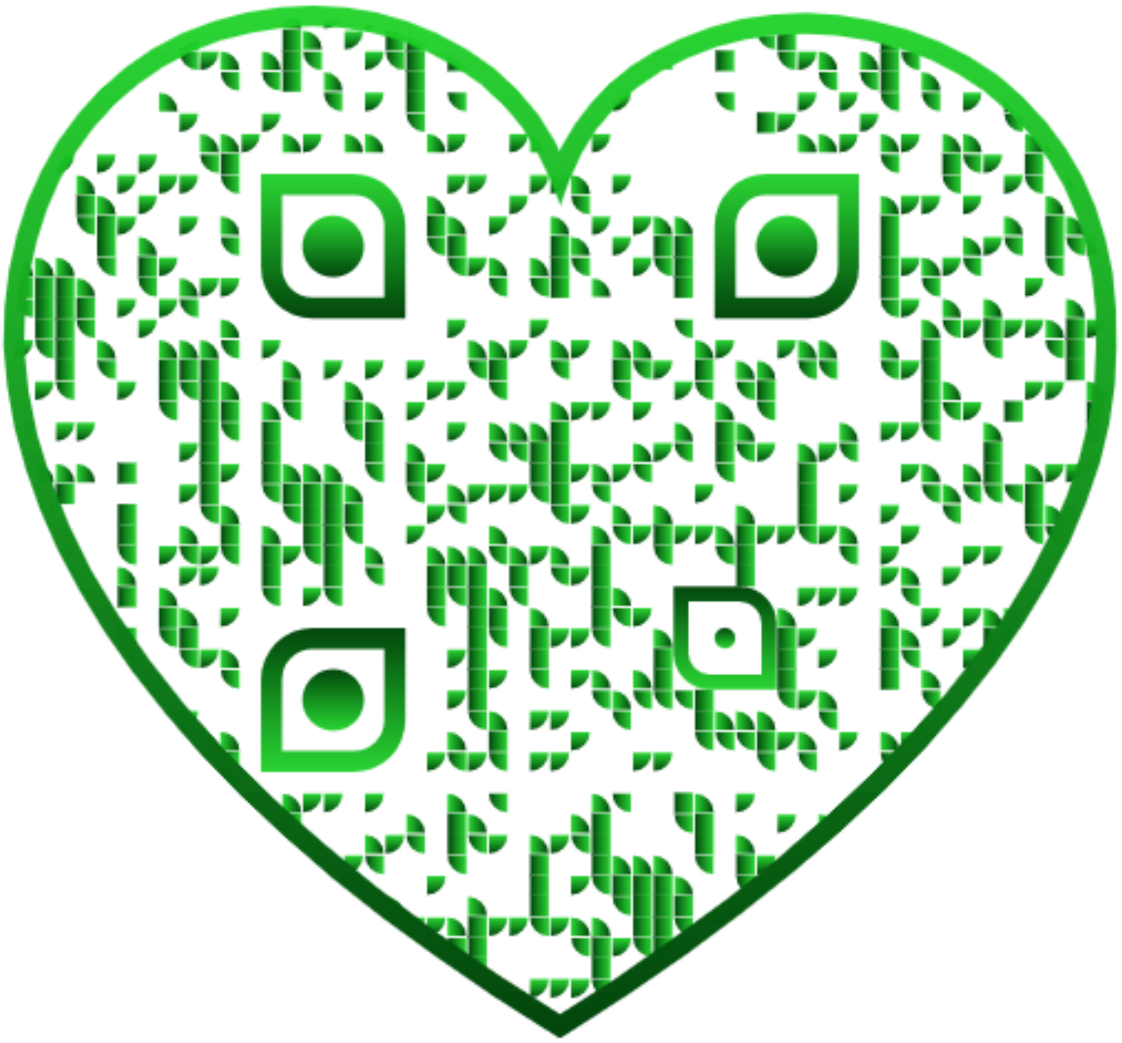
+ JEFF ZUCKER'S BAD NEWS
U.S. VETS IN UKRAINE
10 WAYS TO FIGHT THE CLIMATE CRISIS



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Fashion direction by Alex Badia. Produced by Brittany Brooks. Grooming by Tess Anntoinette. Styling by Metta Conchetta. Tank by Tommy Hilfiger. Pants by Louis Vuitton.

FROM LEFT: RYAN PFLUGER; ALLYSON RIGGS/A24; SUNSET BOULEVARD/CORBIS/GETTY IMAGES

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Opening Act

‘Fuck Putin. I Hope He Dies Soon.’

A DECADE AGO, five members of Pussy Riot donned colorful balaclavas inside a Moscow cathedral and performed a raucous “Punk Prayer” against Vladimir Putin. Two of them, including Nadya Tolokonnikova, went on to spend years in prison. And in February 2022, as Putin’s tanks rolled into Ukraine, Tolokonnikova remained unafraid. “I hate war,” she told the crowd at a Pussy Riot show in New York. “I love peace. I support Ukraine. Fuck Putin. I hope he dies soon.” Backstage, Tolokonnikova said she knew of friends jailed in Russia for protesting the war, but that her friends in Ukraine gave her hope. “Putin was expecting them to give up control of the country. But that didn’t happen,” she added. “They’re never going to give up.” KORY GROW

Nadya Tolokonnikova at Terminal 5 in New York, February

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The Mix

WHAT'S NEW, WHAT'S NEXT, WHAT'S NUTS

R&B's King of Warmth

Giveon broke through by singing with an unforgettable voice all his own

GROOMING BY ESTHER FOSTER

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **Ryan Pfluger** | **11**

GIVEON

THREE YEARS AGO, Giveon landed a 15-minute tour slot opening for Baby Rose and Snoh Aalegra. There was only one problem: At the time, he had released just two original songs. Needing new tunes in a hurry, the R&B singer decided to write something quickly based on each city the tour landed in. One of these, the spare, chilling "Chicago Freestyle," proved particularly popular when he posted a snippet to Instagram – until Giveon got a message from his manager, Simon Gebrelul, telling him to delete the clip.

"That was his most engaged post on Insta," says Gebrelul, who also manages A-list producers like Boi-1da, Jahaan Sweet, and Sevn Thomas, and considers Drake a "good friend." "I felt bad telling him to delete it," Gebrelul continues, "but I'm like, 'Trust me.' " Unknown to Giveon, his manager had sent the "Chicago Freestyle" snippet to Drake, and the superstar had expressed interest in using the clip in one of his own songs.

Giveon's momentum wasn't slowed down for long: Soon, Drake turned that "Chicago Freestyle" snippet into a song on his 2020 album, *Dark Lane Demo Tapes*, amassing close to 400 million streams on Spotify alone. The Drake feature served as a springboard for one of R&B's most notable breakouts in recent memory. Giveon has followed it with aching, slow-rolling hits like "Heartbreak Anniversary" and "For Tonight" – anguished ballads that showcase his quivering baritone. That distinctive voice has helped him stand out on TikTok, where "Heartbreak Anniversary" has been used in more than 2 million videos, and pop radio, where "For Tonight" recently cracked the Top 20.

When Giveon's voice first started changing in middle school, he says, it took him by surprise. "It was a baritone," the singer, 27, explains. "I had no idea how to use it."

It wasn't until the end of high school that he attended a program at the Grammy Museum in Los Angeles and "gained confidence and comfort" with his voice after someone encouraged him to listen to Frank Sinatra's rendition of "Fly Me to the Moon." Until that moment, Giveon recalls, "I hadn't heard anyone that sounded like me."

He still harbored a deep attachment to the R&B his mother played around the house when he was growing up – classics from Anita Baker and Sade, who made vocal acrobatics sound easy. Sinatra, in contrast, "wasn't going over the top with being a powerhouse vocalist. He had that tone, and that carried you through the song."

At a time when much of the singing in R&B mimics the cadences and delivery of hip-hop, Giveon's tone immediately set him apart. When Antonio Dixon, a veteran songwriter-producer who's worked with Beyoncé and Toni Braxton, first heard Giveon, he thought he was listening to a record played at the wrong speed. "I love his voice now," adds Dixon, who co-wrote "For Tonight." "It's got a richness to it; it's really warm."

Mjeema Pickett, Spotify's head of R&B/Soul, was drawn to Giveon's singing when she saw him perform on that same first tour with Snoh Aalegra. "I wasn't expecting his voice to sound like that," Pickett remembers. "I was like, 'Who is this kid?' "

Another early admirer of Giveon's was Sevn Thomas, the producer behind juggernauts like Rihanna's "Work." One day, Thomas and Gebrelul invited Giveon to come through the Record Plant in L.A. when some time opened up unexpectedly. The singer was turning 24 at midnight, but he blew off any plans and showed enough promise in that session to earn a second. At the second session, he made "Like I Want You," a gnawing ballad that became his first radio hit.

As Giveon works on his debut album, one of the most promising demos he's been working on can be found on Instagram, just like the original "Chicago Freestyle." It's similarly bare-bones – just Giveon singing in front of a piano played by Jahaan Sweet. The piano player sketches an outline of a melody, letting notes hang and linger, while Giveon sings about the temptation that comes with his newfound fame, earnestly but painfully. At one point, Sweet seems to whistle quietly, amazed at one of his collaborator's vocal flourishes.

Giveon predicts that this track will appear on the album in some form, because "a lot of people would be upset if it didn't." For now, it lives on Instagram. But he'd probably pull it off the platform if Gebrelul asked him, too. "I don't think he's ever going to question me telling him to take down a post again," the manager says. ELIAS LEIGHT

FAST FACT

LOVE HURTS

Giveon wrote "Heartbreak Anniversary" a year after the end of a relationship: "Let's say it's your anniversary. You're probably gonna bring some flowers, some balloons, some chocolate. What would all those things look like if they had been sitting there for an entire year? That's the image."

SCREEN SHOTS

A Viewers' Guide to the Daniels

The directorial duo break down their best-known music videos and two very WTF movies

By DAVID FEAR

KNOWN COLLECTIVELY as "the Daniels," filmmakers Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert have made a name for themselves as go-to absurdists – you have them to thank for that insanely viral "Turn Down for What" music video and the Daniel Radcliffe-as-farting-corpse epic *Swiss Army Man*. As they release their new multiverse comedy, *Everything Everywhere All at Once,* the two gave us a crash course in Danielogy 101.

"Don't Stop (Color on the Walls)," Foster the People 2011

A driving exam turns into a post-robbery high-speed pursuit.

DANIEL KWAN: Every project we try to do something we hadn't done before – like stunt driving. It turns out we don't like shooting car stunts. At all.

DANIEL SCHEINERT: Our production designer, who we've worked with for years, loves *The Blues Brothers,* so he kept the cop car and drove it around for, like, six years. We did it for him.

"Simple Song," The Shins 2012

A father's funeral brings down the house. Literally.

DK: Listening to the Shins reminded us of Wes Anderson, and we were like, "Oh this could be like in *The Royal Tenenbaums.*" But with our own twist.

DS: We came up with running through a house as it gets demolished – it was just reverse engineering from there. The wrecking ball is a yoga ball on a string.

DK: We used all these old-school tricks, with air mortars and ropes pulling things. Our goal was to *not* kill the band.

"Rize of the Fenix," Tenacious D 2012

A meta-crappy music video is saved by the healing power of Tenacious D.

DK: The first time we actually met Jack [Black] was on set. He shook our hand . . . then he just farted and said, "Hi, guys." I couldn't even laugh because my brain broke.

DS: We worked with an incredible cinematographer – and it's the ugliest thing he ever shot.

DK: We were really intrigued by making something that falls apart on purpose.

DS: There actually were gusts of wind blowing equipment over. And we were like, "That works. Just make sure it doesn't hurt anybody, but perfect." And if Jack and Kyle [Gass] are sweating and don't look that good? "Perfect, we'll use it."

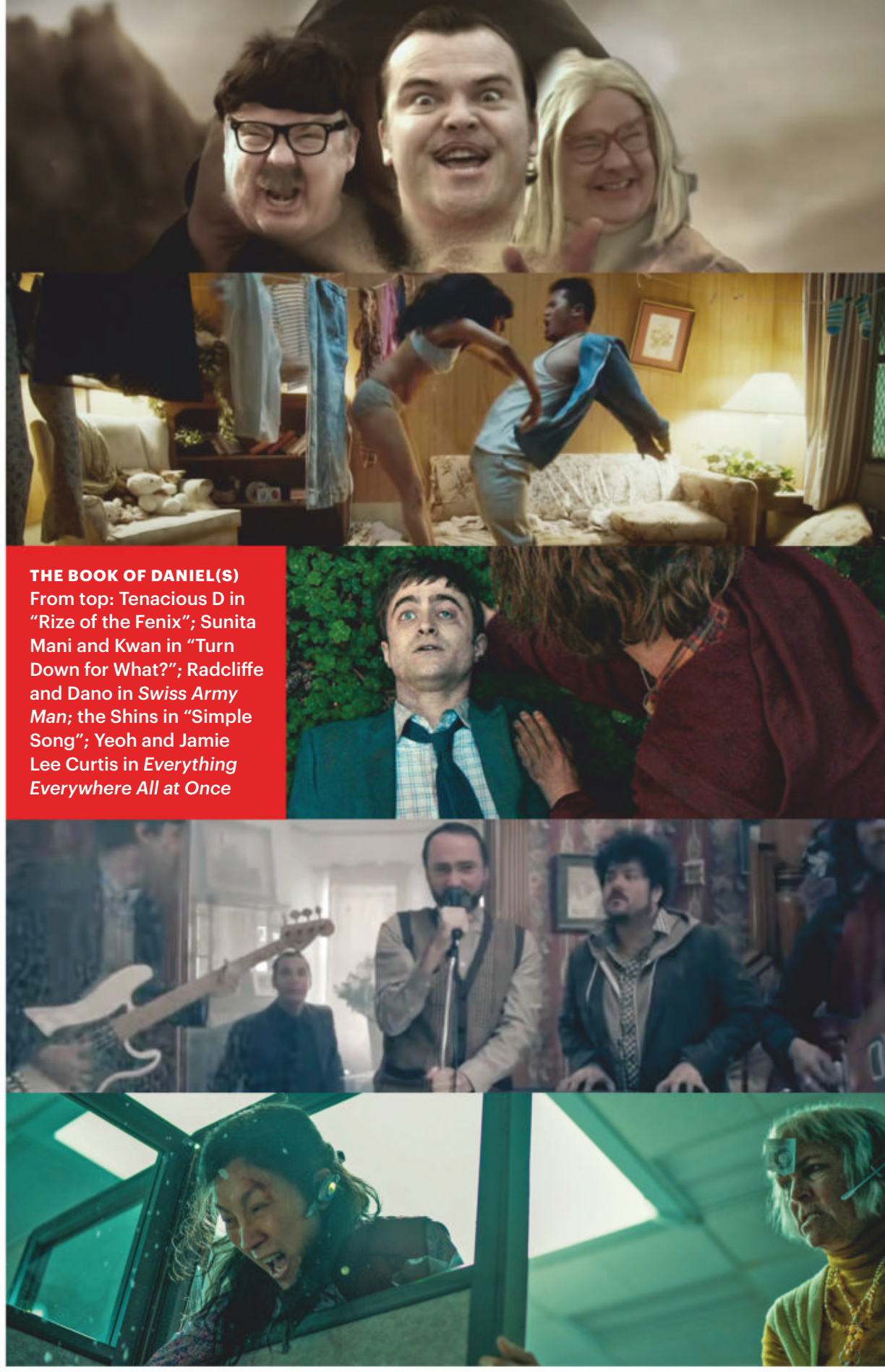
"Turn Down for What," DJ Snake feat. Lil Jon 2013

A man (played by Kwan) infects an apartment complex with dance fever.

DK: Scheinert can tell you this story. It's all his fault.

DS: No one dances like him. We auditioned people, but I was like, "You would be better, Dan." And the butt-cocking is one of our go-to sounds. Within the choreography, we were like, "And this is where you cock your butt gun."

DANS, DANS' REVOLUTION Scheinert (left) and Kwan



THE BOOK OF DANIEL(S) From top: Tenacious D in "Rize of the Fenix"; Sunita Mani and Kwan in "Turn Down for What?"; Radcliffe and Dano in *Swiss Army Man;* the Shins in "Simple Song"; Yeoh and Jamie Lee Curtis in *Everything Everywhere All at Once*

Swiss Army Man 2016

Stranded on an island, a lonely Paul Dano finds a soulmate via Daniel Radcliffe's flatulent cadaver.

DK: An idea came to me: A deserted island. There's a dead body. Some guy's trying to resuscitate him. He's crying. And then it starts farting. Instead of being disgusted, the guy nods his head, like, 'OK.' And then he shoots off the island from the dead guy's farts. It was going to be a short. It evolved. A little.

DS: I spent the next five years trying to bully him into making *that* movie.

DK: We thought, if no one else wants it, we'll be in it and just make something strange that the internet will love. Luckily, we got Dan Radcliffe and Paul Dano, who are infinitely better actors than us, and we got to make it properly.

Everything Everywhere All at Once 2022

In the middle of a tax audit, a woman (Michelle Yeoh) opens up the multiverse.

DK: It was originally going to be about her husband, until we realized it would be more interesting if the story revolved around the woman. And we basically wrote it for Michelle.

DS: We met her in the restaurant of a fancy hotel, thinking we were going to meet the *Crazy Rich Asians* mom. And then she was immediately teasing us like we were her goofy nephews.

DK: We are constantly experiencing comedy and tragedy and confusion and anger all at once. You scroll through your social media feed and people are talking about someone passing away right next to a weird video of a cat dancing. That's the mix of tones you get here. We've always snuck in sincerity under absurdity out of insecurity. Now we're confident enough to do it on purpose.

("SWISS ARMY MAN") A24; ("EVERYTHING EVERYWHERE ALL AT ONCE," SCHEINERT AND KWAN) ALLYSON RIGGS/A24

PROFILE

Residente's Mission to Change 'America'

The most outspoken, unfiltered artist in Latin music takes on his biggest fight yet: pushing a nation to reimagine itself

By JULYSSA LOPEZ

WHEN THE PUERTO Rican rapper Residente hears people from the United States refer to themselves as "Americans," the word grates him, snagging his ear like fabric caught on a nail. In much of the country, it's a word that bounces around freely, rolling off tongues without a second thought – simple, straightforward shorthand, some believe, for the people or culture of the U.S. But pan out to the rest of the continent and it seems more like a symptom of a narcissistic, narrow-minded vision of the world.

"You have to be really dumb, really hollow/It's like saying Africa is only Morocco," Residente raps in "This Is Not America," the lead track from his latest album. He's quick to point out that "America" is the name of an entire hemisphere, not just one country, as activists and politicians – especially those from Latin America – have noted for decades.

The song's video is a visceral gut punch that flashes scene after scene of the violence that the rest of the continent has suffered at the hands of the U.S.: A mother breastfeeds her baby through a wire fence separating her family at the border; a corporate CEO enjoys a lavish meal as an indigenous child looks on in the background. To Residente, all of this ties back to the name "America" and its reflection of U.S. vanity and imperialism.

"It's a way of forgetting about the people making the rest of America," he says on a Zoom call one afternoon in late February. "You have Latin America, you have Central America, you have North America, you have South America, you have the Caribbean – the whole thing is America. Your ego has to be so big that you think that you are the center of the world." For him, the name symbolizes a national ethos that's responsible for centuries of erasure and brutal exploitation. "Doing whatever they want with the name of a continent . . . it's kind of like getting colonized, again, by the U.S."

Residente, 44, explains this while sitting at home in Los Angeles, wearing giant headphones and the beleaguered expression of a boxer who refuses to leave the ring. Since 2005, when he formed the reggaeton duo Calle 13 with his stepbrother Eduardo Cabra, he's been sounding off on political issues, and his stinging, smart-alecky singles have won him 27 Latin Grammys – the most of any artist in history. He's a polarizing figure who represents a necessary and profoundly radical voice to some, while others see a posturing, fake-woke celebrity. He's been at the center of conversations around Puerto Rican independence, and his blunt candor has gotten him into spats with conservatives and leftists alike. He's also made headlines for feuding with artists like J Balvin, whom he denounced as a clueless racist in a scathing eight-minute freestyle in March.

Residente's next fight might be the biggest one he's ever taken on. Over the past three years, he's been working out the complexities of what he sees as a multipart project intended to spark discussions about the history and identity of people from the U.S. He sees it as a long-term linguistic battle – one that he hopes will change the very way a nation thinks about itself.

Residente has been calling out U.S. imperialism and hard power from the beginning of his career: His breakout song was "Querido FBI," a searing diatribe that burst out of him just hours after he found out that a Puerto Rican independence leader named Filiberto Ojeda Ríos had been killed by the FBI in a botched raid. "I wrote it that same night, like at five in the morning," he says. His team sent the track off to radio stations in Puerto Rico, where it became a hit. "It was the first time that I realized how powerful words can be."

Calle 13's work remained heated, centering on messages of struggles in Latin America. In 2017, Residente went solo with an album inspired by his world travels after taking a DNA test to learn more about himself. A more personal turn in his music coincided with intensified political activity on social media, where he lambasted Donald Trump and the mismanagement of Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria.

Some of his hotheaded declarations drew scrutiny. In 2019, he angered the internet with a volley of tweets in which he seemed to contend that white privilege didn't exist among Latinos. Now, he chalks it up to a Twitter misunderstanding exacerbated by translation issues. "I thought that they were calling me 'gringo,' or whatever," he says. "For me, it's the worst thing, because I'm anti-colonization, and Puerto Rico is a colony of the U.S." He claims that he's always understood the racism and colorism that pervades *Latinidad*: "When you're whiter, you have more privilege. I always knew that. That is not something that I just learned." Still, he had a lot of listening to do, particularly about the differences between xenophobia and racism.

"Latin America, South America, the Caribbean – the whole thing is America. Your ego has to be so big to think you're the center of the world."

Months later, a barrage of racist and homophobic text messages leaked from the administration of Puerto Rico's then-Gov. Ricardo Rosselló, as did evidence pointing toward corruption. As Puerto Ricans began calling for Rosselló's resignation, Residente sprang into action – releasing protest anthems alongside Bad Bunny, Ricky Martin, and his younger sister Ileana Cabra, and mobilizing people to show up at demonstrations. "It became a beautiful protest," he says.

Residente's father was a labor-rights lawyer, and the rapper has memories of seeing him attending strikes as a kid. Lately he's found new inspiration in younger people. "We have newer generations teaching us a lot of things that I didn't know," he says.

The album, which features collaborations with up-and-coming artists like the Dominican rapper Nino Freestyle, includes a song about Cuba and another about slang used in the Caribbean. When we spoke, Residente was planning collaborations with visual artists and looking into hosting conversations at universities to find alternatives for "American."

Most important, he wants people to listen. "Once you know how that word can hurt someone," he adds, "that's the best outcome: to change that and to make a difference."

FIRE STARTER
Residente
in Los Angeles

Q&A

Jack White

On his pandemic-era rebirth, making mysterious furniture, and feeling hopeful about rock's future

By BRENNA EHRLICH

THE MUSICAL Willy Wonka has mellowed out – 2022 Jack White giggles; 2022 Jack White hasn't had sugar in two years; 2022 Jack White was transformed by the past two years. "There's been a complete rebirth on all levels of my life throughout the pandemic," he says. "I made a goal to myself that no matter how long it lasted I was going to come out of it with a totally different scenario of looking at life." The evidence is in a new double album, of sorts, that spans the gamut of old-school White Stripes, Beatlesque experimentation, and American-jazz flare: *Fear of the Dawn,* out April 8, and *Entering Heaven Alive,* out July 22. The consummate frontman took a break from tweaking his upcoming albums even as they've been committed to wax – *Donda*-style – and shopping at big-box retailers to talk about his transformation.

You recorded two LPs during the pandemic. Was it hard to stay still for so long?
I don't really usually write about myself, but I wrote a song a few years ago ["That Black Bat Licorice"] about a hospital, a prison, an asylum, any place where I could lay on a cot and clear my vision and clear my head. I push myself so hard that sometimes I would find myself in the middle of a 16-hour day. I might fantasize about breaking my leg, that way I'm forced to lay in a hospital bed and forced to take a break and reevaluate what I'm working on.

I got to work on furniture again [during the pandemic], and it cleared my head. I didn't write a song for eight months. Creatively, that took me to a place I had missed.

So why two albums?
I started writing a lot of songs, and they were in all different directions: some incredibly heavy; almost some like speed metal; some sounded so gentle. I ended up with 20, 25 songs. People don't respond well to double albums these days. I wanted to put them out on the same day, but there's no way we could press all that vinyl and have them all out on the same day.

You made your first foray into sampling on *Fear of the Dawn,* specifically Cab Calloway on "Hi De Ho." How did that come about?
I heard that Cab Calloway song on the radio in the kitchen one day, and I thought, "I love that song; it's just so powerful." So I sampled it, then played a drumbeat that seemed to go along with it. Then I grabbed a bass and I wrote a bass line for that drumbeat, and on and on it went. Pretty soon, I thought, "Man, this is so interesting. I wonder if Q-Tip would find something interesting about this?"

Five minutes later, he sent me back his own scatting on top of it. I love synthesizing different moments, different areas of music, different time periods. The best part about it is everybody I played it to kept thinking that Cab Calloway was me. I thought, "Do I actually sound like that?" So that was bizarre.

Where do you see rock heading?
The genre has been done by thousands and thousands of artists, and some of the people who were the greatest to ever do it did their thing long ago. But look at the hope we have, because people thought hip-hop was only going to last a couple years, and look how long it's lasted. They're still doing incredible things. Like what Kendrick Lamar is doing with hip-hop right now is incredible. It always has room to grow, but it takes that sort of youthful, teenage angst and ambition and energy. And that really means people getting in a room and playing music together, sweating it out.

What was a piece that you were most proud of during those eight months of working on furniture?
[A bench called] My Sonic Temple. It came from a Masonic Temple, like, a hundred years ago. I rebuilt it from the ground up, and you can plug an instrument into the side and play music through this bench. I made it for Johnny Walker; we came up together in the Detroit garage-rock scene. I never explained what's making it make the sound. It's very mysterious.

Do you have anything special planned for the vinyl editions of your records?
There's going to be a bunch of variants. I'm really glad that pop stars have embraced that and released multiple variants of their records. Nothing makes me more excited when I'm walking with my kids in Target and saying, "Look, you can buy a Ramones T-shirt over here, and you can go over and buy a Sex Pistols vinyl record here." I mean, that's incredible. I think it's very, very cool to make that accessible to as many people as possible.

I'm on a campaign that I want to spread in every interview I do this year, which is to beg the major labels to put their money into building new plants just like they used to have 40 years ago. They have more money than God.

So tell us about your new hair. I like the blue!
I don't know . . . but it's really nice not being recognized at a Target anymore! Let me buy my Ramones T-shirt in peace, please! No, I'm just kidding. People have always been nice to me. I'm not complaining about that. Everything's been a rebirth for me. I have a new team I work with. I'm not suffering anybody that seems to be bringing negativity. And I guess that's exemplified by the way I look, too. Everything is brand-new for me.

THIRD MAN RECORDS

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RS REPORTS

The A-Team's Ukraine Resistance Academy

A chef, a novelist, an actor, and a Yalie are training Ukrainian civilians to fight Putin's invading army

By MAC WILLIAM BISHOP

THREE DAYS after the Russian invasion, Hannibal told me he was setting up a group of international military volunteers to fight for Ukraine.

Hannibal – who asked that ROLLING STONE not reveal his name because of security concerns – had been a U.S. Army infantry officer with the 173rd Airborne Brigade. He'd joined up in 2005 after graduating from Yale, done multiple deployments to Afghanistan, and after getting out of the military, he'd bounced around in a variety of communications roles.

A burly middle-aged man who switched between enthusiastic appraisals of operas to technical analysis of high explosives midsentence, he'd also spent years in Ukraine, touring the front lines of fighting in Donbass about 10 times between June 2015 and August 2017 as a military-focused writer and analyst. He felt a connection to the country and the people, in part because he had also returned to America with a well-connected Ukrainian wife.

Two days after calling to tell me of his plan, Hannibal had assembled a small team of battle-tested former elite combat officers. Two days after that, I was standing with him and his crew in an old Soviet factory building on the outskirts of Lviv, in western Ukraine. Their footsteps echoed hollowly in its large empty rooms, thick dust clinging to their clothing as they planned a crash course in guerrilla warfare.

"The defender has the advantage of being able to choose where to fight," he told more than three dozen Ukrainian men and women assembled before him. They were intensely nervous, filled with fear about the war on their doorstep. In a mix of puffy coats, camouflage jackets, old uniforms, and New York street fashion, they were a cross section of Ukraine's Westward-looking middle class. In the gloomy industrial space turned impromptu classroom, the Ukrainians huddled against the cold as snow began falling outside.

Hannibal paused longer than the translator needed to convey his words, before adding: "You will choose your killing ground."

As tens of thousands of Russian soldiers poured into Ukraine at the end of February, Hannibal and his team had linked up with Ukrainian officials to help teach the average Ukrainian how to become effective partisan fighters. It was time to create a new "Lincoln Battalion," as Hannibal called it half-jokingly, after the heavily romanticized but ultimately ineffective group of American volunteers who fought in the Spanish Civil War. "If you are very unlucky and alive at a moment in history," Hannibal told me, "when your position in life and skill set mean that you can contribute usefully on the side of good in an immoral war, there's really only one choice: to help try to end it."

I had my doubts. The most obvious recent example of a large influx of foreign fighters, weapons, trainers, and proxies into a conflict had been during the Syrian Civil War. That hadn't stabilized anything. But it had made the conflict more brutal: Religious extremists ran wild; spy services funded training and provided arms; the armed groups backed by foreign cash fought one another; and all the while, civilians were slaughtered in greater numbers.

Hannibal readily admitted he didn't know how it was all going to work. But he knew his team was uniquely positioned to use its experience and training to help the Ukrainians.

"You and I both know if you get on a train to Kyiv, and you show up in Kyiv," Hannibal told me, "there'll be an AK for you, or a Molotov."

BY THE TIME I made my way into Ukraine, it still wasn't clear to me how far the government had progressed in actually trying to create a stand-alone fighting force of foreigners, or how Hannibal might fit into this picture. True, the government had issued a call, and applications appear to have flooded in from around the world. The Ukrainian government says that thousands were signing up to join the fight. But was Hannibal part of this effort? Or was he just freelancing his way into the war?

I didn't know what to make of the small group of Americans Hannibal had enlisted to his cause. Due to ongoing security concerns, they will be identified by pseudonyms. For my generation, if you talk about a small team of soldiers of fortune that show up to help when no one else will, you immediately think of one thing. Therefore, these pseudonyms will be taken from one of the most popular television shows of the 1980s: *The A-Team*.

Faceman served two tours in Iraq and developed a subsequent career as an artist and actor, landing a few small but recognizable roles in popular TV series. When I first saw him, I assumed he was a burnout more familiar with getting baked on the couch than infantry tactics. I was surprised to learn he had been a decorated Marine officer. His latest project is recording a rock album on his farm in rural Michigan.

B.A., a former cavalry officer, also served in Iraq and conducted intelligence operations targeting insurgents. He's now a novelist with several books under his belt. Despite the pseudonym, he's a photographic negative of Mr. T.: laid-back, thoughtful, and anything but intimidating.

Murdock is a dead ringer for a spy, with the physique of an ultramarathoner, and the unflappable aura of

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MAC WILLIAM BISHOP *is a freelance journalist and former U.S. Marine.*

KYIV CALLING
U.S. veterans drilling Ukrainians on partisan fighting. "It is not a matter of if the resistance wins, but when," one of the Americans told them.

MAC WILLIAM BISHOP

a Zen master. He talked about having lived in France, so perhaps he'd been in the French Foreign Legion? But no. Murdock had no military experience. He said he was a serial entrepreneur, having started successful restaurants in Paris. Shortly before joining Hannibal's team, he'd been on a trek in Nepal studying meditation. His now-cleared mind was coordinating logistics.

So: a chef, a novelist, an actor, and a Yalie.

Accompanying this band of middle-aged misfits was Tawnia – Hannibal's wife. She was the factotum unlocking the doors of Ukrainian officialdom and keeping everyone on schedule. But even as she was navigating bureaucracy to help Hannibal set up his campaign, she was trying to coordinate the evacuation of her elderly parents from Kyiv.

Later, I asked Tawnia how the evacuation was going as we huddled in the entryway of the team's borrowed apartment, taking shelter as an air-raid warning echoed down the cobblestone streets outside.

Her brother was driving them out now, she explained. "They should be here soon, I dunno. Maybe two days. There's a lot of roadblocks."

"And when they get here, my father-in-law is going to kill me for bringing his daughter into a war zone," Hannibal added.

I HAD KNOWN Lviv before the war, and there was nothing normal about the city now. Checkpoints guarded its entrances. Soldiers, police, and random security teams patrolled with guns and yellow armbands. Public spaces have been commandeered as collection points for humanitarian supplies. Few restaurants or shops were open. Everyone was paranoid about Russian saboteurs, or paratroopers suddenly appearing overhead.

The team met its local contacts in front of a university. "I'm Taras One," one of the translators said.

"And I'm Taras Three," the other said. "We're both named after the poet [Taras Shevchenko]."

"Taras Two is in Poland," Taras One added apologetically. "Where the CTC moved just before the invasion."

The CTC, or Combat Training Center, had been located near Lviv in western Ukraine before the Russian invasion, where NATO and its partners conducted multinational training with the Ukrainian military. Both men had worked extensively with the American military as units rotated through the CTC, teaching combined arms tactics and assisting in a modernization program of the Ukrainian military after it was proven to be largely hapless when Russia seized Crimea in 2014.

"Putin is chasing windmills," Taras One told me. "He said he wants to 'denazify' Ukraine. But Ukrainians understand what he wants is to destroy us."

Two other English speakers joined the team to coordinate training efforts. One, who asked to be identified only as Stacy, was a serving Ukrainian military officer who had been on the front lines when the invasion began. An outgoing and energetic redhead, she described taking shelter in a bunker for days of Russian artillery barrages and airstrikes that, she said, were aimed at destroying her unit: "It was not fun."

The semicovert operation required a certain level of comfort with ambiguity, and the embodiment of that was the other English speaker: Mykyta. He had an impressive beard and dressed in "operator chic" – baseball cap, cargo pants, boots, parka, and lots of pouches – and no one could pin down any precise details about his role or background. But he could get things done.

"We need some kind of building we can train in," Faceman said.

"OK," Mykyta said, and made a call.

"Can we make sure the volunteers bring weapons to train with?" Hannibal asked.

"OK." Mykyta sent a text.

Weapons, vehicles, food. Whatever. Mykyta nodded without expression, typed on his phone, and the problem was solved. Soon Hannibal's team was standing on the roof of a Soviet-era factory in a crumbling industrial complex.

"Now just give me an army," Faceman said, looking at the abandoned buildings with satisfaction.

'ARE YOU GOING to teach us how to create a corridor so we can evacuate women and children to safety?" was one of the first questions a volunteer asked Hannibal.

That clarified what this was about. These were people desperate to learn how to defend themselves. They saw the wave of carnage, and they knew it was coming their way. They wanted someone, anyone, to teach them how to survive it.

"Some of you may have never thought you'd be in a position like this," B.A. told the volunteers. "But

WAR ZONE "The goal is to teach you the best practices, so that you will know how to counter them," Hannibal (in mask) told the Ukrainians.

more than anything . . . I want you to know that you have the advantage when the enemy comes here. Because this is your home. It is not a matter of if the resistance wins, but when."

Looking at the 40 or so Ukrainians who showed up for the training, however, that victory seemed less than assured. The youngest was a boy "who looked like he was 14 years old," one of the Taras said (later saying that he was in fact 16), the oldest looked to be in his sixties. They were shopkeepers and office workers, waiters and warehouse managers. Many were college students.

"I can't find an assault rifle to buy," one student told me. He said that the only guns available in stores were .22-caliber small-game rifles. Some of the students were using four-foot-long Mauser bolt actions. I looked at the markings on one. It was made in 1933.

By the next morning, the three instructors had the volunteers broken down into squads practicing room-clearing operations.

"The goal is to teach you the best practices, so that you will know how to counter them," Hannibal told the Ukrainians.

After a full day of training in small-unit tactics and weapons handling, the team was back at its apartment eating tacos thrown together by Murdock. Tawnia said that word had started to spread, and the deputy governor of another province was asking whether the team could come and train his people, since a nuclear-power plant was located there.

It's a "fuckin' resistance academy," B.A. said.

"You know you're never leaving, right?" Faceman told Hannibal.

Hannibal smirked and looked at his wife, who was absorbed in her phone managing her parents' escape.

FACEMAN WATCHED closely as his two teams of four walked down the street carefully, arranged in diamond tactical position for dismounted movement.

"Don't bunch up," he told them. "Stay spread out. Nonverbal communication. I need people to check their sectors and communicate to the squad leader that they are clear."

They'd been training for just a few days, but they seemed to be picking things up. They could move through danger areas in the open using only hand signals. They kept dispersion and covered one another's advances and withdrawals. They could set up barricades and prepare an ambush.

B.A. was working with his squad, which included some older men who had military experience. He was explaining how they could make life hard for the invaders.

"And you are fighting with us, right?" asked a volunteer.

B.A. gave a careful response about being willing to provide the tools they needed for survival, but that ultimately this was their fight. It was clear the answer was "No."

Hannibal said that based on the conversations he had with American officials, he was confident that – so long as his team restricted its activities to training volunteers for the local militia, known as the Territorial Defense Forces – he was staying in the legal gray area where he wanted to be.

And it is hard to remain a neutral participant in a war. American history – from Vietnam to Syria to Niger – is stuffed with incidents of "trainers" who wound up in the middle of the fight.

Then there's the Nazi issue. More than three dozen nationalistic or patriotic "volunteer military formations," or *dobrobaty*, have fought against Russia in eastern Ukraine since 2014. Some are the private armies of oligarchs. The defense and interior ministries have taken control of many. And some accept foreign volunteers into their ranks, or are even composed entirely of "foreigners" from former Soviet republics. One of the dobrobaty, the ultranationalist Azov Battalion, had played a decisive role in the liberation of Mariupol in 2014 – and later been accused of having Nazis in its ranks. Because there were. War junkies, white supremacists, fascists: A number of these had found their way to Azov, which resulted in the group being excluded from receiving American arms or aid as the United States ramped up its military support for Ukraine.

Azov's reputation as a haven for the far-right played well with Russian propaganda aimed at portraying Ukraine as full of Nazis, one of the primary justifications for Putin's war. The same day Hannibal's team was exploring its training ground, a spokesman for Russia's defense ministry, Igor Konashenkov, told state media outlet TASS that "mercenaries" captured while fighting with Ukraine would not be treated as prisoners of war, saying "at best, they can expect to be prosecuted as criminals."

It seemed impossible that any amount of legal caution would prevent the involvement of Americans – regardless of how they defined themselves or tried to limit their role – from becoming an inflection point in an escalating arc of war. Back in 2014, the Kremlin insisted that they had nothing to do with the "little green men" invading Crimea. No one believed them, but the fiction gave Putin cover to achieve his goals. Could this A-Team become part of a propaganda push as well?

LATER IN THE DAY, as the Americans had divided the volunteers into squads and were practicing hand signals throughout the complex, Taras Three noted a man who had come in and was filming the instructors. He was gone before anyone could ascertain who he was or why he was there.

That rattled the team and the Ukrainians. There was reasonable cause for concern. Irregular, hastily formed military groups like this one have traditionally been the softest of targets for spies. A few days prior to the start of the training, according to Stacy, two Russian infiltrators had joined a group of volunteers for the Territorial Defense Force in Kyiv. When weapons were issued, the infiltrators reportedly had opened fire and killed 14 of the defenders before they ever had a chance to join the fight.

When the volunteers broke for lunch, Hannibal's team left the training site to talk over the suspected security breach with Stacy, Mykyta, and Taras One and Three. As B.A. listened to the conversation about what the event meant and how it should be handled, he grew increasingly agitated, his chicken Kyiv untouched on his plate. Finally, he exploded in anger.

"I'm really tense right now," B.A. said, calling for the rest of the day's training to be canceled, so that they could address security concerns. "There may be a video circulating out there that portrays us as active U.S. military, and that is a geopolitical issue." Biden had promised no American boots on the ground, and with good reason: U.S. and Russian troops fighting one another would mean World War III.

B.A. outlined a series of steps that would increase security for both trainers and trainees. "This is a hard conversation to have, but if we don't address it right now, it's going to be a shadow hanging over this thing."

Stacy agreed: "This isn't a game. This is military training."

Mykyta, unreadable as always, simply nodded and started making calls. From that moment forward, the facility was secured by layers of grim-faced bruisers with [*Cont. on 77*]

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Ladies Love Cool Jack

JACK HARLOW IS A RISING SUPERSTAR AND A LEADING ZOOMER SEX SYMBOL. NOW, ALL HE WANTS IS TO BECOME THE GREATEST RAPPER OF HIS GENERATION

BY BRIAN HIATT
PHOTOGRAPHY BY
RYAN PFLUGER

"Who are these fucking bozos on our turf?"

Jack Harlow is in the back of a big black SUV next to his childhood best friend, Urban Wyatt, mock-glaring through his Prada sunglasses at a couple of little kids on a swing set in a Louisville, Kentucky, park. Everyone in the car cracks up, but to be fair, this whole low-to-the-ground city pretty much *is* Harlow's turf these days. In December, it was Jack Harlow Day in Louisville, by mayoral proclamation, during a run of hometown concerts.

One of those shows raised money to restore the gazebo-like structure right here in Cherokee Park, the site of some fond memories. "Smoked a lot of weed in that thing right there," says Harlow, stepping out of the car on an early-February afternoon, his white John Geiger low-tops crunching in fresh snow. "We loitered here in this park. When you didn't have nothin' to do, but you had cars, you'd come here." Harlow, taller and more broad-shouldered than he looks on video, is wearing light jeans and a thin black sweatshirt, no jacket, despite the icy air from the Ohio River. He slides his manicured hands into his pockets.

"I was *fucking* in this park," Wyatt says, with a touch of wistfulness. "I was fuckin' like a deer." The longhaired Wyatt, also Harlow's videographer, dresses at all times like he's ready for a Harmony Korine casting call, but he's a sweet, unassuming, oft-THC-enhanced presence.

Harlow nods. "I was fuckin' against a tree over on the side of the river over there," he says, pointing out the spot. "And definitely over here." He talks almost exactly how he raps, in a sleepy, melodic Southern drawl.

The loitering and weed smoking and fresh-air fornication wasn't all that long ago; Harlow is just 24 years old, with his teenage texts still in his phone. Back in the car, he half-jokingly ponders a visit to a high school girlfriend's house, digging up a lengthy exchange of messages with her mom, who sounds chill. ("Thank you for your sweet note," she wrote. "I appreciate you understanding. We do want her to take time to concentrate on school for end-of-year exams.")

Harlow was already achieving some local fame back then, and now he's a budding superstar, a vanishingly rare white rapper with credibility, co-signed by two of his biggest heroes, Drake and Kanye West.

Senior writer BRIAN HIATT *wrote the Foo Fighters cover story in the October issue.*

"This n---a can *raaaaaaap* bro," West wrote, memorably, on his Instagram, before recruiting Harlow for a guest spot on *Donda 2*. "And I'm saying n---a as a compliment, Top 5 out right now."

Last night, Harlow was up late memorizing lines for a self-taped audition for an acting role that turns out to be a remake of *White Men Can't Jump*. He ends up getting the part, the one Woody Harrelson originally played. "There's just something surreal about where I'm at in life," he says. "It's just crazy to think that you were walking the sidewalks dreaming, and then to be living it – it's like a movie, bro. You're one of the lucky people that got to live a movie-esque life. And I'm in the middle of the fucking movie right now."

In the car, Harlow blasts "Nail Tech," the propulsive, braggadocious first single from his upcoming new album, *Come Home the Kids Miss You,* due May 6. The single only hints at what's in store on the album, which is Harlow's most distinctive to date, thanks in part to a bespoke, detail-intensive, Ye-inspired production process.

"It's probably my least favorite song on the album," says Harlow, who tends to prefer his more vibe-y and lyrically substantive tracks. He's already deeply sick of a fan-favorite anthem from his last album, "Face of My City," though he's still proud of the hit "What's Poppin'." "But I know the effect it's gonna have on people. I'm spitting, and there's energy behind the beat. . . . I have different tastes. I can't believe people love to listen to 'Tyler Herro' on repeat and 'What's Poppin' on repeat."

Harlow sounds, at times, like he's emerged from a very low-powered time machine. He references rappers in their 30s and 40s way more than his actual peers, as if he's gunning to conquer the rap scene of 2010 or so. His focus on lyrical prowess, meanwhile, feels like a throwback to an even earlier era. He wants to make a direct claim to the hip-hop throne, which would arguably make him the first white rapper to do so since Eminem; the late Mac Miller *was* great, but wasn't into proclaiming it. "That's what made Em so hard – he was in the dog pile," says Harlow. "I want to be the face of my shit, like the face of my generation, for these next 10 years. We need more people in my generation that are trying to be the best, and you can't do that with just ear candy, vibe records. You got to come out swinging sometimes. . . . My new shit is much more serious. Right now, my message is letting muh'fuckers know I love hip-hop, and I'm one of the best in my generation. You can't do that with nonchalant, like, 'Eeey, I got the bitches,' in clever ways over and over again. I got to dig deeper this time."

Drake showed up at a Harlow concert in Toronto last year, and invited Harlow back to his house afterward. Harlow had just one thing he needed to ask him, though he's keeping whatever answers he got to himself. "Towards the end of our time, I just wanted to keep it real," says Harlow. "Like, you're familiar with what I do, you came to my show. Like, you're up to speed. He knows what's going on. So: How can I be better?"

HANG OUT WITH Jack Harlow long enough, especially in Louisville, and you'll end up feeling like you're inside a Jack Harlow song. We keep driving down streets – Baxter Avenue, River Road – that he's rapped about or used as song titles. And then there's the 21c Museum Hotel, a funky downtown spot where he likes to stay when he's in town. He's just bought his own place, however, and plans to relocate back to Louisville for good after a couple of years as a nominal resident of Atlanta. ("I really want to give back to this place," he says. "I really want to change the city. Give out opportunities, fix some of the poverty as much as I can.") The hotel inspired his seduction tale "21C/Delta," and today he's staying in its penthouse, a full-floor suite that comes with a private staircase and a giant arty photograph of a shirtless Justin Bieber alongside various nudes in the hallway.

As Harlow himself points out later, the current scene in the penthouse is also highly reminiscent of yet another of his songs, "Already Best Friends,"

LADIES MAN "It's sick," Harlow says of having a fan base dominated by women. "I fuck with it! To be able to make a song that women like is what it's all about for me."

especially the last verse, where he deftly sketches a flirtatious conversation with two young women. Right now, two twentysomething women are, in fact, hanging with Harlow in the penthouse's living room. One, Tahira, a waitress at a strip club who describes herself with a laugh as "a 26-year-old legend," once appeared in a video by local hero Bryson Tiller, and she pops up in several of Harlow's videos as well. The other, Ciera, is a manager at a car-rental chain, with a collection of tattoos she conceals from her co-workers, including a brand-new one on her thigh from earlier today. "I'm really on my girlboss stuff," says Ciera.

Harlow himself has zero tattoos. "I'm an evolutionary person," he says. "So doing something permanently intimidates me. And I like the thought of being an actor and having no limitations in that."

Mostly, Harlow hangs back and encourages his friends to talk. "That's just such an ill thing," he says later, "to be outnumbered by women in a social situation, and they're dominating the conversation," he says. "Great shit comes out of that."

Then again, a lot of the conversation ends up being about Harlow himself, and he doesn't mind. To everyone's vast amusement, Ciera reveals Harlow played "a major role" in helping her redefine her sexuality. ("That's gonna be the cover line – 'Jack low-key changed my sexuality,' " Harlow says.) They first met when Harlow "shot his shot at her" right on the street during a drunken night at the Louisville bars a few years back, when she identified as a lesbian. "He's so cute," Ciera told Tahira at the time. "He looks like the girls that I date!" Now she dates men exclusively. " 'I completely retired from being a lesbian," she says. (For the record, she emphasizes that Harlow can't take all the credit.)

They all reminisce about a night out that "almost" ended with skinny-dipping at a hotel, and Harlow sighs. "Those were the days," he says. "I used to get so twisted back then. I used to get shitty. It was all so new to me."

"It's fun," says Ciera, "to see the evolution of Jack."

"I had my glasses," Harlow says. "I still had the ring curls. I hadn't figured out how to dress or look yet. I just was very, like, raw."

Since then, Harlow – who "didn't even wash my face" for most of his life – has had a much-remarked-upon glow-up. "I'm just a late bloomer/I didn't peak in high school/I'm still out here getting cuter," he rapped in his highest-profile moment so far, last year's guest verse on Lil Nas X's hit "Industry Baby." (Harlow, by the way, had been hesitant to accept guest-rapper slots on pop songs – "You won't believe what I've turned down, because this pocket we've got right now is fragile, man. I've turned down so much shit that would have been a big ol' bag" – but he's enough of a Lil Nas X fan that he signed on without hesitation, only to find out that Nas' handlers wanted to cut Harlow's verse in half in order to shorten the song "for the algorithm." He had to take his case directly to Nas himself. "I don't want to be the eight-bar novelty hip-hop feature on this," Harlow recalls telling him. "Fuck the algorithm.")

Harlow quit drinking last year. He doesn't think he had anything close to an alcohol problem, but he did end up drinking six nights in a row on tour. "I'm sick of waking up with a dry throat, sick of feeling bloated, I'm sick of the decisions I make on it," he says. "I'm in my well-oiled-machine era. Because I can see my future right in front of me. And I feel there's so many people counting on me outside of myself. I just feel like I'm a man. I don't feel like I need to do boyish things anymore."

He's on a journey toward self-perfection, lifting weights each morning with his trainer, EJ Webb, a serene dude who travels with him everywhere. Harlow has optimized his food consumption, too, keeping it in check by simply consuming whatever's put in front of him by his day-to-day manager, Neelam Thadhani. "I gorge things," he says. "If I like a girl,

FASHION DIRECTION BY ALEX BADIA. PRODUCED BY BRITTANY BROOKS. GROOMING BY TESS ANNTOINETTE. STYLING BY METTA CONCHETTA. OPENING IMAGE: TANK BY TOMMY HILFIGER. THIS PAGE: SWEATER BY 424. SHIRT BY TOMMY HILFIGER. JEANS BY 424.

Jack Harlow

“I want to be the face of my generation.
You can’t do that with just vibe records. You got to come out swinging.”

"I am poetic," he says, "but I want some ass. You know what I'm saying? I said that to a girl once. Like, 'I'm a mammal.'"

for the first three weeks of knowing each other, I'm on top of her. I like food. I eat past being full."

His beard is devilishly perfect; each of his earlobes is studded with a chunky diamond. He's sorted out his hair situation, though he'll always be scared of going bald like his dad. And even before the world's seen his new muscles, he's become a leading zoomer sex symbol. He's almost tired of hearing about it. "It started with 'Who the fuck is this white boy? He's dope.' Then it arced into 'Who the fuck is this white boy? He's funny as fuck.' " The latter assessment started with a viral Genius video in which he coined the slang "bricked up," a now-ubiquitous description of male arousal adapted from the Louisville slang "on brick." "Now it's the girl thing. It went dope, funny, girls. I'm ready to get back to dope."

On the other hand, he loves having a fan base dominated by women and can't imagine why any artist wouldn't feel the same. "It's sick," he says. "I fuck with it! . . . To be able to make a song that women like is what it's all about for me. There's a lot of things it's all about, but that's a huge one. That's really what you want, to make something that your crush wants to hear."

There will always be at least one aspect of life distracting him from his relentless artistic and career ambitions. "I am poetic," he says, "but I want some ass. You know what I'm saying?" He laughs. "I literally said that to a girl once. I was apologizing for my desires lightheartedly, like, 'I'm a mammal. I've still got control over myself, but just the way a plant outside wants the sun, I have been engineered to want to reproduce.' "

HARLOW GOT AN EARLY start on both of his lifelong interests. When he was a kid growing up in rural Shelbyville, about 30 miles east of Louisville, on a patch of land with two horses, Buster and Mojo, he asked his parents for Barbie dolls. "Their first thought is, like, 'Is he gay?' " says Harlow, whose family moved to Louisville when he was in third grade. "Then I started undressing Barbies. 'He's not gay.' "

It took slightly longer for Harlow to latch onto rap. His mom played Public Enemy and A Tribe Called Quest around the house; his dad, who sang at their wedding, is more of a classic-rock and country guy. But in Jack's elementary-school days, he and his little brother, Clay, were more interested in superheroes, *Star Wars,* and *Harry Potter.* "I would wake up in the morning and dress up as Anakin," says Clay, who's two and a half years younger, "and he would be Obi-Wan or whatever."

When Harlow saw Eminem in *8 Mile,* he found a new hero to emulate. "That's how it normally goes," Clay says, "Obi-Wan Kenobi to B. Rabbit."

By age 11 or so, Harlow declared he wanted to be a rapper, and never once wavered from that path from that day forward. "He and my mom would freestyle in the car," Clay says. "They would put on instrumentals, and we'd be driving somewhere, and they would both rap." It's unclear if mom has bars: "I can't remember any of her classic lines."

Harlow dropped his debut mixtape, *Extra Credit,* under the name Mr. Harlow, when he was in seventh grade, before his "balls dropped." Most of it, to his chagrin, can still be found online, and it's a fascinating artifact: a very suburban-sounding, hilariously high-pitched kid who's already achieved a fair amount of technical proficiency. The "hit" on the mixtape, among his peers, was a goofy ode to an air freshener, "The Febreze Song": "F-E-B to the R to E to the Z to the E, that spells Febreze."

By the time Harlow was a freshman in high school, he was getting serious interest from labels and managers who saw him as a potential child-star rapper; he even had a meeting at Scooter Braun's house. He got close, but it all fizzled out. So Harlow went back home and "just went to work on a local level," he says. "Burning CDs. Passing out mixtapes at school."

At the time, Harlow was devastated that none of the deals worked out, but he's grateful now. "I dodged a bullet," he says. "I got to go to public school. I got to go to parties. I got to lose my virginity in a normal way. A lot of dominoes had to fall the right way for me to be good at being a rapper. Because I'm still a white guy and I didn't grow up poor. I had to get perspective to say things that could be universally relatable. I got to finish high school. I got to be regular. I got to be humbled. I got to dress poorly. I got to figure myself out."

His self-awareness rarely slipped. Harlow, whose parents run a successful sign business, cut a "Started From the Bottom" remix called "Started From the Middle" as a teen: "Middle-class neighborhood, yeah that's where I started/And my neighbors ridin' round shoppin' at the farmer's market," he rapped, bragging of a "flow nastier than cafeteria food."

For a long time, he was so determined not to front, to avoid pretending to be any harder or more street than he was, that he ended up leaning too hard on a nerdy image. "I was a cool-ass kid in school the whole time," he says, even while he was recording lines like "Hands down my pants while I fantasize about Amanda Bynes." "It took me a while to take my glasses off. I felt literally tethered to them, because I felt like, 'You're the rapper with glasses that can spit really well.' But that's gimmicky. When I started to blossom is when I let go of anything gimmicky. I'm as goofy as I am. I'm as smooth as I am. I'm as funny as I am. I'm as serious as I am. I'm all those things. The totality of myself that I'm honoring is why I'm being embraced by hip-hop."

Harlow kept getting bigger locally and released a series of independent mixtapes of increasing quality, eventually signing to Generation Now, the Atlantic imprint co-founded by DJ Drama, after his speed-rapping single "Dark Knight" led to a bidding war. He met Chris Thomas, who became his manager, before he graduated from high school. "I was like, 'Hey, where are you applying to college?' " Thomas says. "And I remember him saying, 'Oh, I'm not going to college. This is what I'm gonna do. This is gonna happen for me.' And I was so taken aback at that. He already knew what was gonna happen, and his vision has all come to life."

A WEEK BEFORE our Louisville trip, Harlow is staring at the tentative track listing for his new album on a whiteboard in the corner of a Los Angeles recording studio. He ticks it off, song by song: "Smoker. Smoker. Smoker. Smoker. Smoker. Smoker. Smoker. Smoker. [*Cont. on 76*]

PREVIOUS SPREAD: SHIRT BY TOMMY HILFIGER. JEANS BY LEVI'S.

FIGHT FOR THE FUTURE

10 WAYS TO SAVE THE PLANET

The clock is running on the climate crisis, but we have the tools, knowledge, and political skills to fight it

By Jeff Goodell

Illustration by Javier Jaén

THE CLIMATE CRISIS is here, and heartbreak is all around us. The early promise of dramatic action from President Biden is sinking in the old mud bog of fossil-fuel politics. Meanwhile, despite 40 years of warnings from scientists and the decline in the cost of clean energy, carbon pollution is still increasing and the world is heating up as fast as ever. The final sentence in the U.N.'s latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report on the impacts of that warming is stark and unequivocal: "Climate change is a threat to human well-being and the health of the planet. Any further delay in concerted global action will miss a brief and rapidly closing window to secure a livable future."

The heartbreak comes not from a fear that the battle is lost, but from the realization that there will be no transformative moment when the world wakes up to the climate crisis. There will be no fixes. There are winners and losers, for sure. But collectively, we are heading into the unknown – politically, ecologically, economically, morally. "The climate emergency is not an issue," futurist Alex Steffen says. "It is an era."

This does not mean it's time to give into doomer-ism. On the contrary. Every ton of CO2 that is kept out of the atmosphere makes our future a little cooler. Every gas-burning furnace that is replaced by a heat pump gives fossil-fuel gangsters like Russian President Vladimir Putin a little less leverage over our lives. And every climate protest makes it more likely that we can seize this transformational era to build a better world.

But the politics of climate action have shifted. Nobody is arguing anymore about whether or not burning fossil fuels heats up the Earth. Now the fight is about justice and equity. It's about the widening gap between the Saved and the Doomed. It's about dealing with our grief about how much has already been lost and how much more loss there is to come. There is certainly good news to call out, including the fact that most climate scientists now agree that because of actions to slow the growth of carbon pollution in recent years, the worst hell-on-Earth future climate scenarios are unlikely. But that is hardly a cause for celebration. "This is going to be a really grim year for climate politics," says Green New Deal activist and UC Berkeley professor Daniel Aldana Cohen. "Let's remember the big picture, and fight like hell for the best projects and campaigns."

"The climate emergency is not an issue," futurist Alex Steffen says. "It is an era."

In that spirit, here's a list of the 10 actions we can take in this new era of climate disruption. Some are stubbornly idealistic; others are imminently practical. The list leaves out a lot, from investing in grid upgrades to the benefits of rent control and raising the minimum wage to help the most vulnerable among us. Even if everything on this list were achieved, it wouldn't "solve" the climate crisis. But it would be a helluva start.

1 Tax carbon.

In February, Rhode Island Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse took to the Senate floor for his 280th "Time to Wake Up!" speech about the climate crisis. The centerpiece of Whitehouse's plan was the need for a tax on fossil fuels. It is an argument that speaks to a truism of economics: to make something scarce, tax it.

Here's Whitehouse's argument in a nutshell: Clean-energy tax credits and a clean electricity standard – two popular proposals to accelerate the transition away from fossil fuels – are a step in the right direction. But only a price on carbon will get us all the way. Pricing carbon reaches every corner of the economy; it fuels innovation ("suddenly every carbon-reduction strategy has a revenue proposition; no more government-chosen winners and losers," Whitehouse said); it raises investment by sending a market signal to Wall Street; it puts a tax on imports from countries like China with less-strict climate policies; finally, Whitehouse argued, a carbon price helps to unravel what the International Monetary Fund says is more than a half-trillion-dollar subsidy propping up the fossil-fuel industry in the U.S. "You want to know why the fossil-fuel industry can so easily corrupt American politics?" Whitehouse thundered. "That's your answer. That's 660 billion answers. A $660 billion subsidy every year is one hell of a motive."

"You want to know why the fossil-fuel industry can so easily corrupt American politics?" Sen. Whitehouse said. "A $660 billion subsidy every year is one hell of a motive."

The problem with pricing carbon, as Whitehouse well knows, is that saying the word "tax" is political suicide in America. Which is why corporations like ExxonMobil have come out in support of it. As a former senior director on Exxon's Washington team put it in a video secretly recorded last May by undercover Greenpeace activists, the company backs a carbon tax "as an easy talking point" and an "advocacy tool" because "there is not an appetite for a carbon tax."

But appetite or not, the idea is slowly gaining ground – if not as a straight tax, then something more creative, such as under the guise of a carbon-trading program that caps carbon pollution and then allows the market to set a price for any pollution that exceeds the limit. The trend is clear: As the world heats up, the drive to put a meaningful price on carbon pollution will only grow.

In the U.S., the real question is not will it happen, but how fast, and what shape the policy will take. Whitehouse and other lawmakers, including Democratic Sen. Ron Wyden, who is chairman of the Senate finance committee, have been advocating for a carbon fee-and-dividend program. "Fee and dividend" means that money raised from taxing the consumption of fossil fuels would be sent back to Americans in the form of a dividend check. In other words: We tax Big Oil and Big Coal, and you get a check for a few hundred bucks every year. You can see the appeal. A carbon fee could be crafted to return higher dividends to low-income consumers, thus abiding by Biden's pledge not to raise taxes on families earning less than $400,000 annually.

How effective would it be? A recent analysis by Resources for the Future, a nonpartisan energy and environmental research organization, found that a U.S. carbon fee that started at $15 per metric ton and escalated to $50 per metric ton by 2030 would cut the country's carbon pollution by about 44 percent from 2005 levels by 2040 – doing a lot of heavy lifting for Biden's goal of reducing greenhouse gases by 50 percent from 2005 levels by 2030.

2 Electrify everything.

In the U.S. there are roughly 290 million cars and trucks, 70 million fossil-fueled furnaces, 60 million fossil-fueled water heaters, 20 million gas dryers, and 50 million gas stoves. What if all those were electrified? Saul Griffith, an Australian American engineer and author of *Electrify: An Optimist's Playbook for Our Clean Energy Future,* thinks electrification can reduce 80 percent of U.S. emissions by 2035.

JESSICA WEHRMAN/CQ-ROLL CALL/GETTY IMAGES

MARY ALTAFFER/AP IMAGES

The logic is straightforward: Using electricity is more efficient than burning fossil fuels for almost every purpose. And while coal and gas still power about 60 percent of the U.S. grid, the falling price of clean energy means that a low-carbon grid is not a utopian fantasy. The cleaner the grid, the cleaner and cheaper the electricity, and the stronger the argument becomes to ditch any appliance or vehicle that can be replaced by one powered by electricity.

According to a study co-authored by Griffith, mass electrification in the U.S. would create up to 25 million new jobs. Most of them – installing solar panels and wind turbines, upgrading the grid, and replacing dirty heaters with clean ones – would necessarily be local (you can't offshore the installation of an electric heat pump in your basement). The investment sums are staggering: Globally, the auto industry is on track to invest half a trillion dollars in e-vehicles. It will refit and build factories, train workers, write software, upgrade dealerships. In the U.S., a dozen new electric-car-battery factories are in the works.

"It's one of the biggest industrial transformations probably in the history of capitalism," Scott Keogh, CEO of Volkswagen, told *The New York Times*. "The investments are massive, and the mission is massive."

None of this requires new technology. Electric cars have enough range for almost everyone, and the purchase price is nearly the same as a gas guzzler, while the cost per mile to drive is much lower (a 2018 study from the University of Michigan found that electric vehicles cost less than half as much to maintain as gas-powered cars). Heat pumps have such efficiency now that they beat traditional furnaces and boilers in many climates. Modern induction stoves are safer and more precise than cooking with gas. In most parts of the country, wind and solar are now the cheapest ways to generate power. And let's not forget e-bikes! In 2020, Americans bought around half a million e-bikes, outselling electric cars and hybrids combined. And the impact that even modest usage of e-bikes is huge: A 2020 study from Portland State University revealed that if e-bikes replaced just 15 percent of car travel, total carbon emissions from passenger transportation could be reduced by 12 percent.

3 Go local with solar.

It's now obvious: The future is solar on homes, solar on apartment buildings, solar on malls, solar on parking lots, solar on fast-food joints, burrito stands, and strip clubs. With the sun, small is beautiful. Wasted space becomes a platform for power generation. With solar, cost has always been a problem, but that is ending now as the price of solar panels has plummeted over the past decade. Nobody pretends that you are going to make steel from solar, but it is clean and reliable and won't go down in a blackout like the one in 2021 that left 11 millions Texans freezing in the dark for days and was responsible for as many as 700 deaths.

According to one study, if we had solar arrays on our big-box stores, we could power almost 8 million homes in the U.S.

JOBS! JOBS!
According to one study, mass electrification in the U.S. would create up to 25 million new jobs. The auto industry is on track to invest half a trillion dollars in e-vehicles with more than a dozen factories in the works.

A recent report by the nonprofit Environment America found that the amount of space available on the rooftops of shopping malls and big-box stores like Walmart, Home Depot, and Target in the continental U.S. amounts to 7.2 billion square feet, or about the size of El Paso, Texas. The report finds that superstore roofs could generate enough clean energy to power almost 8 million average U.S. homes. Or to put it another way, rooftop solar panels on big-box stores could provide half of the annual electricity that these stores currently demand.

One downside to small-scale solar is energy storage. The bottleneck has always been batteries, which are big and expensive. But that's changing fast, in part because of the push for battery innovation associated with electric cars. Home storage, in your garage or closet, is now a reality. Also, electric vehicles are evolving into portable power-storage devices, giving homeowners backup power in their driveway. For companies like Tesla, batteries may in the long run be a bigger part of their business than cars.

But big utilities don't like it. For more than 100 years, power companies have had a monopoly on electric power. Rooftop solar disrupts that and allows customers to be in control of their own destiny. In sunny Los Angeles and Florida, power companies are fighting to levy taxes on local solar installations. In the short-term, these power companies can slow the transformation to cleaner power. But in the long run, the local solar will win out, not just because of low cost, but because it's extremely popular among both Republican and Democratic voters.

4 Buy out coal plants.

Coal is the dirtiest, most carbon-intensive fossil fuel, responsible for 30 percent of global carbon emissions. The biggest coal burner is China, which consumes more coal than the rest of the world combined. Here in the U.S., coal is slowly being displaced by cheap gas, wind, and solar. But there are still 179 active coal plants, generating 20 percent of U.S. electricity. Shutting them down and replacing them with cleaner, cheaper energy is the fastest way to lower carbon emissions and slow the climate crisis. "The transition beyond coal is inevitable," says Justin Guay, director for global climate strategy at the Sunrise Project. "But the timeline on which it happens isn't."

In Germany, the government is using reverse auctions to entice power companies to close down coal plants early. In New Mexico and Colorado, new laws have been passed to allow utilities to restructure their debt to speed retirement. In the U.S., Guay and others have suggested what amounts to a cash-for-clunkers program, in which green banks

partner with other institutions to buy out the coal plants and shut them down.

But shutting down a coal plant is not just a question of economics. It's also a question of jobs and community. "How do you replace the good pay, and union jobs, that will be lost as we shut down the coal industry?" Guay asks, saying the Green New Deal and a just transition has been "mostly happy talk" for coal communities. "We still have this abstract conversation about decarbonization and emissions that is purposefully devoid of the dirty words like 'coal,' 'oil,' or 'gas' because many of our national leaders want markets to do the dirty work. But I don't see how we can envision an endgame for coal unless we talk about it directly."

The Darth Vader wing of the banking industry hasn't helped. Globally, commercial banks have channeled $1.5 trillion to the coal industry since 2019. In the U.S., the biggest underwriter for the coal industry is JPMorgan Chase. Jason Opeña Disterhoft, senior climate and energy campaigner at Rainforest Action Network, says JPMorgan's list of coal clients "reads like a who's who of the most carbon-heavy companies on the planet."

5 Start telling the truth about the climate crisis.

How much is that $2 million house on the beach going to be worth when there's an octopus swimming through the living room? What's going to happen to all those refineries on the Gulf Coast as the demand for oil plummets? Banks and corporations face huge financial risks as the age of climate disruption accelerates. One just-published report found around $343 billion in weather- and climate-related economic losses in 2021 alone, the third-costliest year on record. A 2019 study concluded that 215 of the world's largest companies face nearly $1 trillion in climate-related risk as soon as 2024. Very little of this is disclosed in corporate financial reports. "The coronavirus pandemic has laid bare just how vulnerable the United States is to sudden, catastrophic shocks," Sarah Bloom Raskin, Biden's nominee to the Federal Reserve Board of Governors, wrote in *The New York Times*. "Climate change poses the next big threat."

Many corporations are also pretending to be more virtuous than they really are. Exhibit A: In February, the New Climate Institute, a European think tank, released a study of 25 of the world's biggest companies. These corporate giants account for five percent of the world's carbon emissions. The report discovered that not only are the companies not dropping those emissions anywhere near fast enough to meet net-zero targets, but that the targets themselves were hollow: The report found that in aggregate the promised 100 percent reduction by 2050 will look more like 40 percent.

Students rallying for change at the Yale Bowl in 2019. Activists are calling for universities to purge fossil fuels from their investment portfolios.

"How do you replace the good pay and union jobs that will be lost as we shut down the coal industry?" asks one activist.

One of the biggest problems: the overuse of carbon offsetting. Instead of cutting their emissions directly, offsetting allows companies to reduce emissions indirectly, often by planting trees or protecting forests (which absorb and sequester CO2). Except that too many credits go for forests that were never going to be cut down in the first place, or for those that burn up in fires.

6 Build denser, fairer, more humane cities.

Urban life is far gentler on the planet than suburban life. People who live in cities spend less time stuck in traffic in their SUVs; they have better access to local food; they live in buildings that are more efficient. But cities need a climate upgrade too: more bikes, better public transit, more green space.

Step one: Ban cars in the inner city, or at least minimize their presence. As urban populations rise and cities become gridlocked nightmares, a backlash against cars is growing: Berlin is considering creating a car-free zone larger than the size of Manhattan; Paris is banning through traffic in the city center. Other cities, including New York, are implementing congestion pricing that levies a toll on vehicles during certain hours, hoping that will limit traffic and raise money for more climate-friendly urban upgrades.

Step two: Revise zoning laws to increase density. Fast-growing sprawl metastasizes via highways and low mortgage rates. One easy fix: Instead of single-family homes, build more duplexes and triplexes. Get rid of exclusionary zoning to allow accessory dwelling units, which is basically a second house in the yard of a home.

Step three: massive investments in new public housing. Ten million new units over the next 10 years would be a good start. In addition, existing public housing needs to be retrofit so it's safer, healthier, and more efficient. That will help get the most vulnerable people out of harm's way. Coastal flood risk to affordable housing is expected to triple by 2050. "In places where properties are vulnerable to sea-level rise, land tends to be less expensive, so moving those to higher ground areas means higher costs," says Priya Jayachandran, CEO of the National Housing Trust, a nonprofit focused on affordable housing. "As a country, we have been comfortable subsidizing housing, but only in the worst areas. We don't like the idea of spending money to put poor people in higher-income areas. That has to change." Also important: Restrict development in areas vulnerable to flooding by limiting federally backed mortgages in vulnerable areas.

7 Get loud and hit them where it hurts.

The biggest roadblock to climate action has always been the cowardice and complicity of our political leaders. For many, the lack of significant accomplishments at last year's Glasgow climate talks and the failure of Biden's Build

ERICK W. RASCO/"SPORTS ILLUSTRATED"/GETTY IMAGES

Back Better agenda have been a brutal awakening. "Activists have become jaded because there's been a lot of promises from politicians without a lot of action to back it up," says Dana Fisher, an environmental-activism expert at the University of Maryland and author of *American Resistance*. "A lot of young people are looking at other tactics now."

One example: Student activists are escalating the war over fossil-fuel divestment on university campuses. A group called the Fossil Free 5 is challenging five of the richest universities in the country – Yale, Stanford, Vanderbilt, Princeton, and MIT – to purge fossil fuels from their investment portfolios. Pushing for divestment is nothing new. But now, instead of just trying to convince university leaders that their investments are immoral for contributing to the climate crisis, students at the five universities have filed complaints with their state attorneys general, requesting an investigation into whether the schools have violated laws related to investments by nonprofit institutions.

"The climate movement has to be smarter about where the power really is right now," says Josie Ingall, a 20-year-old sophomore activist at Yale. Like other activists, Ingall is tired of what she calls "the paradigm of individual complicity" that suggests the climate crisis can be solved by recycling and composting. "We are a group of people who are incredibly privileged to have an affiliation with such a powerful, influential, wealthy institution like Yale, which has an endowment of $42 billion. They've made a killing investing [in fossil fuels]. And as activists, we want to use our leverage to move those networks away from environmental destruction."

8 Fund small-scale geoengineering research.

Maybe Dr. Evil wants to deliberately fuck with the Earth's climate, but nobody else does. Nevertheless, it's probably inevitable, given the risks we face. There are many potential forms of geoengineering, from brightening clouds to stabilizing glaciers, but the technology that gets the most attention is solar engineering, which amounts to scattering particles in the stratosphere to reflect away sunlight and cool the Earth. Scientists know it works because it's essentially what volcanoes do (particles injected into the stratosphere from Mount Pinatubo, which erupted in 1991, cooled the planet 0.6 C for more than a year, until they rained out of the sky).

There are 12 million reasons why solar geoengineering is a bad idea that should never be pursued (I explored many of them in my book *How to Cool the Planet*). Even funding geoengineering research has long been taboo, under the theory that the better we understand the technology, the more likely we are to use it. But a corollary is also true: The less we understand the technology, the less we know about the real risks. Given the hot future we face, and the millions of lives that are at risk from extreme heat and heat-driven crop failures, we need to know all we can about every tool at our disposal. "Yes, there are risks to solar geoengineering," says climate economist Gernot Wagner, author of *Geoengineering: The Gamble*. "But there are also large potential benefits. So it's not just about the risks of geoengineering. It's about balancing those risks against the risks of unmitigated climate change."

9 Eat crickets!

America's (and, increasingly, the world's) appetite for meat is barbecuing the planet. Livestock eat up a lot of land, drive deforestation, and are carbon-intensive in their own right. Without reforming industrial agriculture and reducing meat consumption, it will be virtually impossible to limit warming to 2 C, much less 1.5 C.

The good news is there's a lot of innovations and options in how and what we eat, including plant-based meat like Beyond Burgers, alternate proteins like crickets, and, soon, cell-based meat grown in labs. The potential carbon savings of a dietary switch is huge: A 2018 University of Michigan report found that producing a Beyond Burger uses 90 percent fewer greenhouse-gas emissions and 99 percent less water than a beef burger.

Insects are a particularly promising alternative. I've had them at a restaurant in Mexico City, fried and served in a bowl – spiced with lime, salt, and red pepper, they tasted like spicy potato chips. Insects offer the equivalent protein of beef and poultry. Even if the idea of eating crickets makes you nauseous, they can still have a big impact: Insects can be fed to chicken, replacing land-hungry fields of corn. They can also be ground into flour for baking. And I know it's impossible to imagine crickets at your next Super Bowl party, but consider this: In the 17th century, Europeans were skeptical of eating a new vegetable called "potato" because it was not mentioned in the Bible or because they thought it would cause leprosy.

LEISA TYLER/LIGHTROCKET/GETTY IMAGES

Crickets are a great protein source and easier on the Earth than meat.

Food waste is also a climate problem. About a third of the food grown in the U.S. goes to waste. Globally, food waste is responsible for three times more greenhouse-gas emissions than aviation. It's a moral issue, too. According to one analysis, a billion chickens, more than 100 million other land animals (turkeys, pigs, and cows), 25 billion fish, and 15 billion shellfish end up in landfills.

CUT WASTE

A billion chickens, more than 100 million other land animals (turkeys, pigs, and cows), 25 billion fish, and 15 billion shellfish end up in landfills.

10 Fight and win the culture war.

Much has been said about the failure of Big Media to cover the climate crisis. It's too often pigeonholed as an environmental issue rather than a slow-rolling planet-wide catastrophe. Or it's infused with "both-sidesism," in which journalists are duped into the false idea that there is any real debate about the fundamentals of climate science. Or it's just not discussed at all. When Hurricane Ida slammed into the Gulf Coast late last summer, six of the biggest commercial TV networks in the U.S. – ABC, CBS, CNN, Fox, NBC, and MSNBC – ran 774 stories about Ida, an analysis by the watchdog group Media Matters found. Only 34 of those stories mentioned climate change. Mark Hertsgaard, the executive director of Covering Climate Now, an initiative dedicated to improving climate reporting, calls it "media malpractice."

It's time for journalists to gear up for a much bigger battle. The climate fight is quickly becoming the centerpiece of a broader media-driven culture war, where science and data are irrelevant for opponents. Exhibit A: During a 2020 segment about wildfires on the West Coast, Fox News star Tucker Carlson offered this interpretation of events: "Climate change, they said, caused these fires. They didn't explain how exactly that happened. How did climate change do that?" Carlson asked. "In the hands of Democratic politicians, climate change is like systemic racism in the sky. You can't see it, but rest assured it's everywhere and it's deadly." For him, the climate crisis is just fodder for his lies and distortions. The most important data point for the future of life on Earth may not be the parts per million of CO2 in the atmosphere, but the Nielsen ratings of power-and-money-driven clowns like Carlson. Corruption and disinformation are what's killing us now. That's what's so heartbreaking about this moment. Thanks to 40 years of science, we know what's happening. We have the tools and technology to address the crisis and to build a better world. We just need to find the political will to use them.

Eviation's carbon-free prototype, Alice

FLYING THE ELECTRIC SKIES

Air travel is one of the worst polluters of the atmosphere, but carbon-free, battery-powered flight is finally ready to take off

BY TIM DICKINSON

THE WORLD'S FIRST all-electric passenger airplane looks like it could be at home in the sea. Instead of a traditional metal tube, its fuselage resembles an orca – with a sharp nose and a wide body that tapers dramatically to a T-shaped fin at the rear. Its wings are long, knifelike. The plane's twin propellers, driven by quiet, piston-free motors, thrum like the future.

Known as Alice, this airplane is the invention of Seattle-area startup Eviation. It is built to carry nine passengers as far as 500 miles on a charge – a range that could connect San Francisco to San Diego, or Boston to Washington, D.C. – with what once seemed like a pipe dream: carbon-free flight.

Alice represents one of the boldest solutions to one of the most difficult obstacles to a zero-emission future. Airplanes produce about 2.4 percent of annual greenhouse pollution – or the equivalent of four New York Cities. Unchecked, aviation emissions could soon hog up to one-sixth of the world's remaining "carbon budget," or the amount of CO2 humans can still release without producing catastrophic warming. Yet the industry has lagged behind other modes of transport in pivoting from fossil fuels, in large part because green alternatives have been too heavy to get off the ground.

When I visited Eviation headquarters in January, the Alice prototype was conducting high-speed runway testing in advance of its highly anticipated maiden flight. The aircraft is the brainchild of Israeli entrepreneur Omer Bar-Yohay, a lanky 43-year-old veteran of the electric-car-battery industry who co-founded Eviation in 2015.

To most observers back then, the physics of electric flight seemed, well, fucked: Heavy batteries didn't pack enough power to propel an aircraft a meaningful distance. But as Bar-Yohay began probing the problem, he realized the limiting factor wasn't the power packs. It was legacy airplanes. "The prevailing thinking," Bar-Yohay told me on the tarmac, "was that someone was going to convert a plane," much as Elon Musk had repurposed the chassis of a Lotus Elise to fashion the first Tesla roadster. But the range

COURTESY OF EVIATION

of such a conversion – 150 miles or so – screamed novelty, not profit.

Bar-Yohay is a scientist by training, and his breakthrough came when he calculated that building an electric airplane from scratch – with lightweight composite materials, super-efficient electric motors, fly-by-wire systems – could shave off enough weight to extend the range to 400 miles or more. "If you built a very, very slick aircraft," he says, "there was a mission profile that worked."

He lays out the business case for Alice in an aviation system where long-haul journeys are completed with short connecting flights. "In 2019, the world sold 4.5 billion air tickets," he says. "More than half were under 350 miles. There's a huge market."

ELECTRIC AVIATION is in its infancy, and the record book won't wow fans of *The Right Stuff*. The fastest all-electric flight – by a Rolls-Royce single-seater – set a record of 345 mph in January, going less than half the speed of sound. The longest flight by an electric-powered aircraft to date, a modified Cessna, is a mere 341 miles.

The limitations of electric flight might seem to outweigh the opportunities. But aviation's contribution to global warming is more significant than commonly understood. "Flying is by far the worst thing we do for the environment," says Jeff Engler, CEO of the aviation startup Wright Electric. He points to research that the emissions linked to a single seat aboard a round-trip trans-Atlantic flight can wipe out the carbon benefits of eating vegetarian for a decade.

Worse: Airplanes also leave behind short-lived contrails and cirrus formations that trap additional heat in the atmosphere. According to a November study in *Environmental Research Letters,* aviation's "warming footprint" – its true contribution to climate change – has become "at least twice as large as its carbon footprint."

But flying without fossil fuel is devilishly difficult. Not only does conventional fuel deliver about 50 times more power per pound than a battery, but the weight of the fuel load decreases the longer a plane travels, while battery packs just become dead weight after they've expended their electrons.

This means there are practical limits to what pure, battery-powered aviation can accomplish – even with hoped-for advances in technology. Other innovators hope to produce electricity on board instead, using fuels like hydrogen. Wright Electric is an Albany, New York-based startup with backing from the U.S. military and NASA. It has developed an ultralight, ultrapowerful, two-megawatt motor capable of operating at 40,000 feet. Engler bills it as an "electric jet engine," and Wright Electric has announced plans to swap the motors into an existing 100-passenger short-haul jet from Europe.

There are critical details to sort out – including whether the plane would be powered by hydrogen fuel cells or another green power source. But by 2026, Wright hopes to debut an aircraft that can compete on commuter routes like Paris-to-London or Los Angeles-to-San Francisco. "The busiest routes in the world are one-hour flights," Engler says, adding that he hopes to take a bite out of the CO2 emissions from that market first, "and, then, over time, expand the range."

IT'S ONE THING to listen to a founder dream big about deploying electric airplanes. It's another to see that dream hurtle down a runway. Eviation is headquartered at a municipal airfield in Arlington, Washington. The location is close enough to Seattle to tap into engineering talent from local aerospace behemoth Boeing, but far enough from SeaTac not to have to wrangle for airspace.

The FAA requires reams of data before a new aircraft leaves the ground, and when I visited, Bar-Yohay was putting Alice through its paces, accelerating to speeds just short of those required for flight. Eviation expects to complete runway tests this winter and anticipates Alice's first flight this spring. The company will then build three sister aircraft to complete close to 2,000 hours of flight time before the plane is fully certified.

Getting Alice to this moment has been a trial by fire, all too literally. Eviation's first prototype debuted to rave reviews at the Paris Air Show in 2019, but in early 2020, a fire in the lithium-ion battery pack destroyed that aircraft. The lesson was as valuable as it was painful. The Eviation team redesigned the power system to ensure that a single failed battery cell can't spark a packwide failure, and the plane can complete a safe, powered landing. (Consumer comfort with battery safety poses an ongoing challenge; a *Nature* review warns starkly, "It is difficult to overemphasize current concerns with lithium batteries on commercial aircraft.")

Building, and rebuilding, Alice gave the Eviation team freedom to innovate. Its battery packs weigh more than 8,000 pounds and are hidden in chubby, curved sections on either side of the fuselage. The packs are strong enough to contribute to the integrity of the aircraft, saving weight. And the wide bottom of the plane acts like a wing. "The body itself takes part in lifting the weight of the battery," Bar-Yohay says.

The name of Eviation's modern aircraft is a throwback – both to Lewis Carroll and 1960s psychedelic rock. "After a very long working day and night, we were listening to Jefferson Airplane's 'White Rabbit,'" Bar-Yohay explains. "Someone said, 'Hey, let's just call it Alice.' And it stuck."

The plane's technical specs are eye-popping – it charges six times as fast as the fastest Tesla, needing a half hour of charge time for an hour of flight. Eviation insists the business case for the plane is as strong as the environmental one. Alice has durable motors, fewer moving parts, and digital electrical systems. It requires little maintenance, aside from scheduled battery replacement that can be done at a fraction of the price of a carbon-powered plane's upkeep. "We can cut between 50 and 70 percent of the [operating] cost for an equivalent jet," Bar-Yohay insists.

At launch, Alice will have three models – an executive plane, a commercial nine-seater, and a cargo craft. Shipping giant DHL has already ordered 12. As part of the company's transition from a startup to manufacturer, founder Bar-Yohay stepped down as CEO recently, but remains on the board.

Eviation expects to deliver its first planes in 2024. Until then, the image of Alice speeding down the runway – propellers cutting the air without the clack of combustion – stands as a metaphor for the promise of electric aviation: tantalizingly close to takeoff.

"In 2019, the world sold 4.2 billion air tickets. More than half were under 350 miles. There's a huge market."

DIRTY AIR

A single seat aboard a round-trip trans-Atlantic flight can wipe out the carbon benefits of eating vegetarian for a decade.

GAME-CHANGING TRANSPORTATION

Electric aviation is just one advance at the very edge of clean mobility. Below, a roundup of other advances in decarbonizing the world's transportation, on land and at sea.

LIQUID-HYDROGEN FERRIES

Hand it to the Norwegians for making green transport sound like death metal: Meet the MF Hydra — a ferry powered by supercooled liquid hydrogen. With room for 300 passengers and 80 cars, the angular ship looks like it shares a designer with the Tesla Cybertruck. Introduced in 2021, the ferry is expected to reduce the carbon footprint by up to 95 percent.

FUEL-CELL FREIGHT TRAINS

Hydrogen can be tricky: Both the gas tanks and the fuel cells that turn the gas into electricity are bulky. But there's plenty of room on the rails, where hydrogen has become an alternative when electrification is too costly or impractical. Canada is testing hydrogen retrofits of diesel engines that will pull freight from Calgary to Edmonton.

AMMONIA CARGO SHIPS

Ocean shipping accounts for three percent of global greenhouse emissions. But shipbuilders have begun pivoting from diesel to a surprising substitute. Comprised of hydrogen and nitrogen, ammonia is better known as a cleaning agent or fertilizer, but it can also power combustion engines. To make it, you only need electricity and water.

FROM LEFT: LEE BERRESFORD; CIPTO NUR KHOI/THE NOUN PROJECT; PROSYMBOLS/THE NOUN PROJECT

EAT FOR FREE. FIND FOOD

Alexis Nelson, a.k.a. the Black Forager, cooks delicious meals with the ingredients she finds outside — so can you

BY MEAGAN JORDAN

Finding nutrition in wild plants may be an ancient necessity, but for Alexis Nelson — known as the Black Forager on TikTok, where she has 3.3 million followers — it's urgently 21st century. "Foraging is the piece of the puzzle that is the solution," says Nelson, 29. "It makes you think about your food choices, and helps you cherish the food you are lucky enough to have."

Between her mother's teachings in the garden and summers at camp, Nelson, who lives in Columbus, Ohio, knows about edible plants. So when she graduated college, tired of ramen and Boca burgers, she returned to the familiar: "Some neighbors started doing urban foraging and that lit up a lightbulb for me, like 'Oh! I used to do that!' "

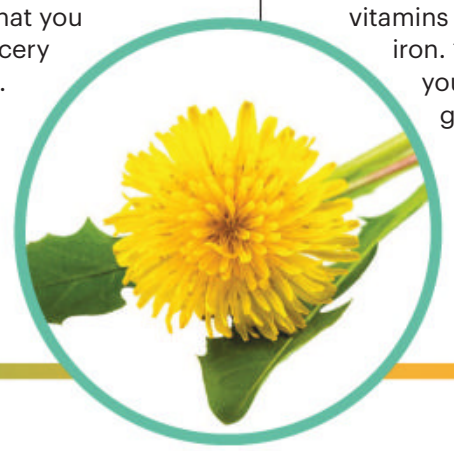
If done responsibly, foraging has myriad benefits: It encourages plants to produce fruit, while helping slow demand for mass-produced foods. "It has a lot to do with the footprint of your food," says Nelson. (Always double-check what you eat. A mistake in the field can end in an upset stomach — or worse.)

Foraging while Black is also a revolutionary act for Nelson, who hopes her presence encourages more people to join. "So much foraging knowledge was being passed around during slavery, because if you weren't creative with the meager amount of food you were given, you couldn't take care of yourself. Foraging feels like tapping back into a practice that we just forgot about for a couple of generations."

Here, Nelson suggests 10 common plants that you can forage.

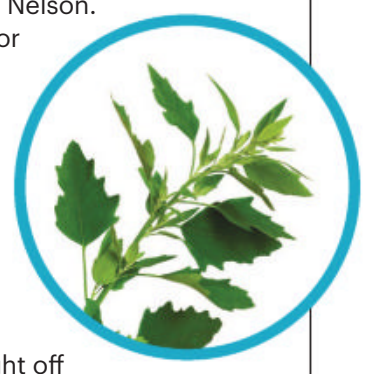
Roses and Rose Hips

Roses are more than a romantic gesture, they're a tasty addition to meals. "Here in Ohio, if you give wild roses an inch, they'll take 17 miles," says Nelson. Although the petals are edible, boiling them and condensing the steam makes rose water, which is common in Middle Eastern desserts and can be used on your skin and hair. "I love making rose water each summer, when the first roses are in full bloom," says Nelson, who adds that rose hips, the fruit that forms after a rose gets pollinated, are high in vitamin C and make a great tea. In order to get the full properties, use it when its scent is still strong and lingering. "Also, don't eat the roses that you picked up at the grocery store," warns Nelson. "Those were definitely sprayed with herbicides and pesticides, and your stomach will get mad at you."



Lambsquarters

Sometimes called "wild spinach," this plant is a double for the supermarket staple. "In a blind taste test, I would not be able to tell the difference," says Nelson. She likes them for their tenderness — which they maintain throughout the summer, "a rarity for a lot of greens" — and because they're high in B6. "You can eat them right off the plant — the seeds, too," says Nelson. "They are cousins to quinoa. They're super-tasty."



Dandelion

Dandelions are the perfect foraging food — tasty, nutritious, and versatile. "If we're lucky to find a dandelion that's already blooming, I would bask in their sunshine," says Nelson. "Then I would take them home and dip them into cornbread batter and give them a bake or a fry. You'll get these delicious fritters — savory on the outside, sweet and floral on the inside." They're full of vitamins A, C, and K, as well as iron. "They're really good for you," says Nelson, who suggests using the leaves in a salad. "Be smart about where you're gathering," though. "If it's on the dog-pee side of the sidewalk, you do you."

Juniper

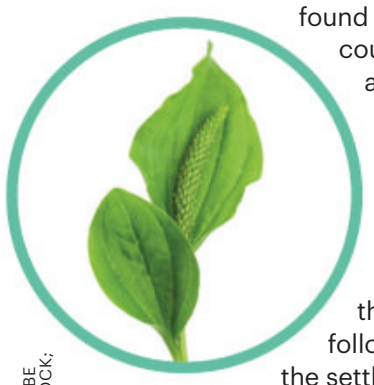
Most people might know juniper as a cure for lox or a flavoring for gin, but Nelson sees it as something more versatile. "It makes a nice, bright, salty seasoning, so instead of using lemon salt, consider juniper," she says, noting that it makes a tasty addition to holiday cookies. It also creates a natural yeast. "I love using junipers for the little bloom of yeast that grows on the outside of the fruits as they ripen," she says. "I use juniper to start ferments and to start sourdough." To drive home just how many uses the plant has, Nelson points out that, in the U.S., juniper has been burned to make an alkaline ash that is used to "nixtamalize" corn. "It's the process of breaking down the outer shell of corn, to make the nutrients of corn more bioavailable for our bodies and help us absorb the things about corn that's good for you," she explains. "Shoutout to indigenous food science!"

FROM TOP: ANTON IGNATENCO/ADOBE STOCK; ORTIS/ADOBE STOCK; VALENTINA R./ADOBE STOCK; SCISETTI ALFIO/ADOBE STOCK

Nelson turned her passion for foraging into a profession.

Plantain

Not to be confused with the banana-like fruit, plantago major and plantago lanceolata are weeds found all over the country. "There's a joking name — white man's footprint — because indigenous groups realized that the plant followed behind the settlers," says Nelson. That's not to say the plants, at least, are unwelcome: "These leaves are fantastic both for food and their medicinal properties," she says, noting that they're full of calcium and beta carotene. "When the leaves are small and tender, they are delicious to eat as salad greens. When they get older and more fibrous, cook them how you'd cook collard greens." For Nelson, though, the plantain is more medicinal than edible: "A trick that a lot of outdoorsy kids learn is that if you get a mosquito bite or bee sting, you find a leaf from the plantain and you either crumble it up real hard or you chew on it to make a poultice," she says. "It takes the swelling out and helps the itching stop right away."



Pines

Pines, spruces, and firs have edible needles that are high in vitamin C. Historically, people have made teas using the needles in the wintertime. "One of my favorite uses of pine is out of the Russia-Georgia border region," says Nelson. "There is a pine-cone preserve, where fresh, green pine cones are put in a sugar or honey solution, and they are very slowly brought to a boil and cooled back down until the pine cones themselves are like candy, and a syrup is made." She says the solution has been used as both a dessert and effective cough medicine. Be careful, though, that you don't get them confused with the yew plant, which is similar looking but entirely toxic. "That being said, once you look at the yew plant and look at any of the others, you will not get them confused," says Nelson.

Mugwort

Though common mugwort is invasive, there are upsides to it being everywhere. "When I'm in New York, I see huge spans of it," says Nelson. "It's very good at colonizing spaces humans have touched." In the West, California sagebrush — also in the mugwort family — is roughly the same: "They both do similar things for cooking, giving a sage-meets-rosemary flavor, especially the younger leaves." In Europe, it's infused in alcohol, while in Asia, it's used as a flavor additive in local cuisine. "I love making mugwort green tea," says Nelson. "It can cause crazy dreams — but I can only speak for myself." Plants from the artemisia family are used to moderate hormones, including those affecting the uterus, says Nelson, making it useful for things like easing menstrual cramps or symptoms of menopause, though experts advise that those who are pregnant stay away from eating it." The name comes from the moon goddess Artemis," says Nelson. "Across the globe, it's synonymous with uterine health."

Mulberries

"Growing up in Ohio, the way I knew summer was here was by seeing how the mulberries ripen around June," says Nelson. The dark-purple berries — high in iron and vitamin C — have been used by indigenous people in North America for hundreds of years, for everything from fabric dye to flavoring in corn bread. "You can make jelly from the berries," Nelson explains, noting that it's got some more adult uses, too: "Last year I made wine with a combination of mulberries and juneberries. Half of it was bottled as wine and the other half I let it continue aging, so now I have mulberry vinegar." While its fruit is the most popular part, the tea made from its leaves are known to have antidiabetic and antioxidant effects.

Curly Dock

Curly dock may not be as popular as dandelion, but it's just as readily available in many cities. "This is the one that I see invading little areas, where trees are planted along the sidewalk," says Nelson. The tart leaves can be used in salad, and the flowers can be added to bread dough. "I make little sourdough crackers and add some curly dock flowers into the batter to make it really nutty when it roasts," Nelson says. Curly dock has high levels of iron, which has historically led societies to use the plant as a treatment for anemia. "That being said, they can lead to an increased likelihood of kidney stones," says Nelson. So, those with a family history should probably steer clear. "For everyone else," she says, "go wild, fam!"

Acorns

Acorns are everywhere, so it's not surprising that the oak is said to support more life forms than any other tree in North America: They give housing to animals, insects, and humans (or wood for housing), as well as edible treats. "Most cultures globally, at some point in their history, have eaten acorns. And not just as a starvation food — but as an important part of their culinary culture," says Nelson. "These days, you mostly see it in indigenous groups here in the United States." According to Nelson, indigenous groups in western California and Koreans utilize acorns in the most creative ways. "In Korea, acorn jelly, called *dotori muk,* is still a really popular dish," says Nelson. "It's just taking cornstarch and water and boiling it down until it gets thick. It then sets like a savory Jell-O, and you cut it into pieces and serve it with sauce. It's really tasty."

FROM TOP: ADRAINT BEREAL/"THE NEW YORK TIMES"/REDUX; EMBERIZA/ADOBE STOCK; ANGHI/ADOBE STOCK; VOLFF/ADOBE STOCK; MARGO555/ADOBE STOCK; VERA KUTTELVASEROVA/ADOBE STOCK; ALEXLUKIN/ADOBE STOCK

Wolves were reintroduced to Yellowstone in the Nineties and thrived — altering every aspect of the environment for the better.

STOP THE WAR ON WOLVES

In Montana, the radical governor changed the rules of the annual hunt, endangering a great rewilding success story

BY CASSIDY RANDALL

IN FEBRUARY 2021, a black wolf wandered across the border of Yellowstone National Park in Montana. Called 1155, he wore a radio collar that park biologists fit him with three years before. When he left the safety of the park, 1155 was what biologists call a "dispersed male," leaving his pack to travel alone in search of a mate. As a descendant of wolves reintroduced in 1995 to Yellowstone and Idaho's Frank Church-River of No Return wilderness, he was playing out a role in a success story three decades in the making: to ultimately restore wolves to their former range from which they'd been exterminated.

The year before, scientific findings emerged from Yellowstone on the impact of wolves' return to the landscape. In their long absence, coyotes had run rampant and the elk population exploded, overgrazing the willow and aspen. Without those trees, songbirds declined, beavers no longer built dams, and streams began to erode. In turn, water temperatures were too high for cold-water fish. Upon wolves' reintroduction, in what's called a trophic cascade, the elk populations began falling immediately. Within about 10 years, willows rebounded. In 20, aspen began flourishing. Riverbanks stabilized. Songbirds returned, as did beavers, eagles, foxes, and badgers. Wolf populations in Montana and Idaho began to grow and slowly disperse to other parts of the Rockies and beyond. Media and conservationists heralded it as the greatest rewilding event in history.

Not everyone out west agrees.

It's unclear when, exactly, 1155 walked onto Robert E. Smith's private ranch 10 miles north of the park. Director of the conservative Sinclair Broadcasting Group (the biggest

DENNIS FAST/VWPICS/UNIVERSAL IMAGES GROUP/GETTY IMAGES

owner of television stations in the country), Smith is a major donor to Republicans in the state, including giving thousands to newly elected Montana Gov. Greg Gianforte's campaigns. Smith's ranch is managed by Mike Lumley, vice president of the Montana Trapper's Association, who was aiding Gianforte in his long quest to kill a wolf. The pair had set a trapline on Smith's property, and 1155 walked right into it, triggering metal jaws to close on his foot and keep the wolf trapped.

It's also unclear how long 1155 lay caught before Gianforte, presiding over the frenetic session of a citizen Legislature that meets for a mere four months every two years (in Helena, a four-hour drive from Smith's ranch) arrived to kill him. According to Montana law, trappers are required to check their traps at least every 48 hours to avoid leaving animals to suffer unnecessarily – a requirement the governor would have been familiar with, had he taken the required certification course all hunters are legally bound to take before killing a wolf. Later, Gianforte would say that he was already in the area, although one Montana reporter speculated how serendipitous it was that after weeks of waiting, the governor happened to be nearby when a wolf wandered into his trap; that perhaps Lumley had discovered 1155 and called Gianforte to let him know this was his chance – although law also states that trapped animals must be killed or released immediately upon finding them. Timeline aside, Gianforte shot 1155 – likely in the head to preserve the pelt for mounting – even though 1155 was radio-collared, and almost certainly knowing researchers have typically invested thousands of dollars in the animal for the purpose of scientific research

In Montana, violation of hunting rules can incur a fine of up to $500 and a stripping of hunting privileges. But the state's Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) agency – overseen by the governor – handed Gianforte only a written warning for trapping 1155 without certification. The governor mostly stayed mum on the incident, until reporters ambushed him at a press conference, where Gianforte called the lack of certification a "slight misstep" and called the kill "a tremendous honor."

"That he got off with just a warning was a slap in the face to all ethical sportsmen," says Tim Roberts, who's on the board of the Montana Wildlife Federation, a conservation organization in the "radical middle" that advocates for managing wolves with a sense of responsibility and fair chase. "Governor Gianforte already had it in his mind that he was going to annihilate wolves in Montana."

("States are responsible for the welfare of the gray-wolf population," a representative for Gianforte tells ROLLING STONE. "Montana is fulfilling its responsibility by ensuring a healthy, sustainable population of wolves well beyond recovery targets set by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and will continue to manage wildlife wisely and judiciously.")

The episode opened the floodgates in a state where many people have elevated a long-standing hatred of wolves to dogma. For the first time since wolves were deemed recovered enough for the federal government to hand their management back to Montana in 2009, the all-red state Legislature wasn't reined in by a Democratic governor committed to managing wolves as wildlife, not vermin. Gianforte, a Trumpist Republican, is a wealthy creationist, best-known for body slamming a reporter on the eve of his 2017 election to Montana's sole congressional seat. He took office toting a questionable environmental record, having sued his own state in 2009 to block longtime public access to the East Gallatin River from his Bozeman mansion. And he'd just shot a collared Yellowstone wolf to show he would do what he pleased on the hunting issue, research and rules be damned.

GOP lawmakers took full opportunity to strike a heavy blow in the West's century-old wolf wars. By the end of the session, Gianforte had signed new laws that would extend the wolf-hunting season by several weeks; allow night hunting on private land with artificial lights, thermal-imaging tech, and night-vision scopes; neck snaring and the use of bait to hunt and trap; and increase the kill limit to 20 wolves per hunter.

And the kicker: Montana joined Idaho (which recently allocated $1 million for efforts that lawmakers there say could wipe out 1,300 of its estimated 1,500 wolves) in allowing monetary compensation to hunters for each wolf killed – what many call a bounty. Now, in the two states where American taxpayers spent $30 million to reintroduce wolves, anti-wolf organizations are legally paying hunters to kill them. The assault threatens the West-wide recovery the U.S. began 30 years ago – all because wolves are a socially charged political football used to appease a certain electorate, with the actual science on their contribution to the natural world often left on the sidelines.

"There's nothing normal about this," says Jamie Rappaport Clark. Now executive director of Defenders of Wildlife, Clark led the reintroduction of wolves to the area back in the 1990s as species director for U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services. "The numbers can't sustain 20 wolves decimated per individual. It defies all logic. There is no other creature in this country that's treated like wolves. It's just reckless killing across the board."

WOLVES ONCE ROAMED the western part of the continent from the Arctic to Mexico, but they were hunted to eradication from the 1870s onward. More than any other predator, wolves were seen as a symbol of the untamed wild in the West, and the antithesis of civilization: a danger to humans, a menace to ranchers, and competition for big-game hunters. That narrative persists, although wolves very rarely attack people and kill only 0.04 percent of available livestock.

Although USFWS underwent the requisite public-comment period in the early Nineties, people here still characterize the reintroduction as if the federal government "brought wolves and dumped them in Yellowstone Park basically overnight," says Roberts. Many people versed on the issue believe social tolerance for wolves would be higher if the animals had continued their own, slower, dispersal down from Canada that was already in progress, instead of the agency dropping them in the middle of sagebrush-rebellion country, where private-property rights reign supreme and a significant portion of people don't trust the federal government.

"There was never an educational effort to say 'This is why wolves could be good,'" says Roberts. "And as wolves expanded, you've got conservative ranchers and sportsmen who felt like they had no say in their management, and the hatred just grew."

Roberts, a longtime traditional bowhunter who lives in Fort Benton, describes himself as an independent with conservative leanings. He sees the expanded wolf hunt as "political bullshit" that panders to the rich landowners and outfitters profiting off elk hunts who backed Gianforte's run for governor. It's also a tit-for-tat system based mostly on revenge. "'You crammed it down our throat back then, so we'll cram it down yours now,'" he says. "If you make predators and agencies the boogeymen . . . well, hatred's easier to practice than education and calm."

If leveraging fear-based perspective for political gain sounds familiar, it should. "It's a lot of what Trump does in drumming up the base," says Dan Vermillion, a fly-fishing outfitter in Livingston who sat on the Fish and Wildlife Commission for 12 years, from the time wolves were delisted and Montana first allowed a hunt through 2018. He saw a lot of rancor dissipate over those years, as hunters felt they were part of the management strategy and the state set up programs to reimburse ranchers for lost livestock.

But this is where wedge issues can come in handy politically. Once a proudly purple state, Montana swung red for many of the same reasons as the rest of the country: in part due to the perception in rural America that the Democratic Party is disconnected from low- and middle-income and non-urban people, and – in a state where more than three in five people identify as hunters – out of growing fear that liberals will infringe on Second Amendment rights.

"Hunters, for years, get all spun up on Second Amendment issues, and they give the Republican Party a fair bit of latitude on wildlife issues, because they feel more

"As wolves expanded, ranchers and sportsmen felt like they had no say in their management, and the hatred just grew."

BOUNTY

In Montana and Idaho, where taxpayers spent $30 million to reintroduce wolves, hunters are now legally being paid $500 to $1,000 per wolf killed.

strongly about the Second Amendment," Vermillion says. "The governor and Legislature are listening to a small but vocal minority when they make these decisions on wolves, and there are a lot of other Republicans who aren't going to stand up on it because it doesn't really matter to them."

Outside of the core wolf populations in the Northern Rockies (Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota all have sizable numbers; Washington has an estimated 132 wolves, Oregon 173, California fewer than 20), wolves were still protected under the Endangered Species Act until the Trump administration delisted them in 2020. A federal judge reinstated their protections on Feb. 10. But that ruling doesn't apply to Montana or Idaho, raising the question: What would it take to trigger relisting here? Wiping out 1,300 of Idaho's wolves? Losing more than 20 percent of Yellowstone's population?

THE MAN known as the god of wolf trapping sits across from me in a cafe in Plains, a rural town of less than 1,200 people set on the banks of the Clark Fork River. Dan Helterline, 55 years old, with a bushy beard going to slate and kind eyes behind wire-rimmed glasses, grew up here, like the three generations of his family before him. He taught himself to trap muskrat and fox in the surrounding Lolo National Forest, becoming a hunting and trapping guide for half the year and smoke jumping (a firefighter who parachutes into wildfires) for the Forest Service in the summers. He retired from smoke jumping seven years ago, after breaking his hip on a landing, and turned to wolf trapping full time, both on his own and taking people on guided trapping adventures. His god status in the small trapping community comes from the fact that he laid the foundations for the practice in Montana from the first legal hunt after delisting, and he maxes out his limit every year – or did, back when the limit was five wolves per person. This season, even the god has caught only four wolves.

"No one is going to get 20 wolves," he says. "I bet no one even gets 10. Yes, they've passed all these mechanisms to give people more tools, but they're not going to tenfold-increase the take of wolves."

Montana's forest floors aren't running red with canid blood because wolves are so hard to hunt, Helterline explains. Wolves are smart, secretive, and travel long distances over large territories. Setting traps for them requires an immense amount of knowledge of their movements and behavior, which in turn requires significant time in the woods studying tracks and signs.

"People think that trapping is so unethical, so unfair. But a trap pan is five square inches, and a wolf has a territory of hundreds of square miles. So you tell me how it's unethical trying to get an animal that might come through your area once a month to step into a five-inch pan. The thing about ethics, there's a wide spectrum of them. They're not black-and-white, everyone has their own – like opinions, or religion. That's why it's hard to enforce laws on ethics."

Like many hunters and trappers, Helterline sees the harvest as a form of wildlife management. In fact, because trappers spend so much time on the ground, they're often the ones informing biologists on numbers of species in certain regions and advocating for the complicated regulations on management and conservation. Helterline talks about how in the years between reintroduction and delisting he saw game zeroed out here as the wolf population boomed. Now that the hunt keeps wolf numbers down, he sees more moose in the Lolo than he's seen in 10 years. "Without management, the population control is starvation, or disease. And people think that's humane. Have you ever seen a dog die of mange? It's ugly."

Trapper Dan Helterline says wolves are incredible, but without the hunt, the animals suffer from "starvation and disease."

"I'm not against controlling some number of wolves to keep the population happy. But what's going on? It's just a slaughter."

Helterline doesn't hate wolves, he says before we part – far from it. He thinks they're incredible animals that are here to stay, and remembers with awe the time he saw a pack of 12 in the Selway wilderness (outside of his traps, he's only ever seen one other wolf in the wild in all his time in the mountains). But there are people who do hate them, he says – there are extremes on both sides.

IT TAKES a lot of effort, funding, and time to collar a wolf, wildlife biologist Sarah Sells tells me. We're sitting in the Missoula office of the Montana Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit. Sells lives and conducts research in nearby Flathead. Her Ph.D. work helped develop the modeling that FWP uses to estimate the state's wolf population, and she tells me about one memorable field stint.

Her team had traveled 21 miles into the Bob Marshall, a wilderness area southeast of Glacier. Horses were packed in the heavy gear of foot traps (pressure-based traps meant to capture an animal without injury, much like what Helterline uses – Sells has put her own hand in one to test that there's no pain when it springs), collars, and other equipment. The wolves knew they were there, she says, but immense care was taken to seek out areas far from the cabin the team stayed in and conceal traps. Sells set one in a clearing. The next morning, a female wolf lay caught in it. The team collared her to track her movements and released her. Over the next two days, the team caught no other wolves. On the last night, the pack came to the cabin and howled, and on the last morning, the team went out to collect the traps to find each flipped over unsprung.

"It was like a wolf telling us to get out," she says. "And we could see the movements of the one we'd just collared – she followed us 10 miles down the trail, as if escorting us out of there. It was really special."

It takes time to get data from a collar that researchers can actually use, Sells explains. But a year after Sells collared her, the wolf from the Bob Marshall was killed. "It's just unfortunate when you don't get enough data, in particular for this purpose of modeling numbers. I mean, that was a couple of weeks of effort from several people."

The loss of collared wolves from hunting and other mortality events is one of the reasons the state moved away from that kind of research. Boyd says a significant portion of wolves collared in her last year at FWP were also killed that same year.

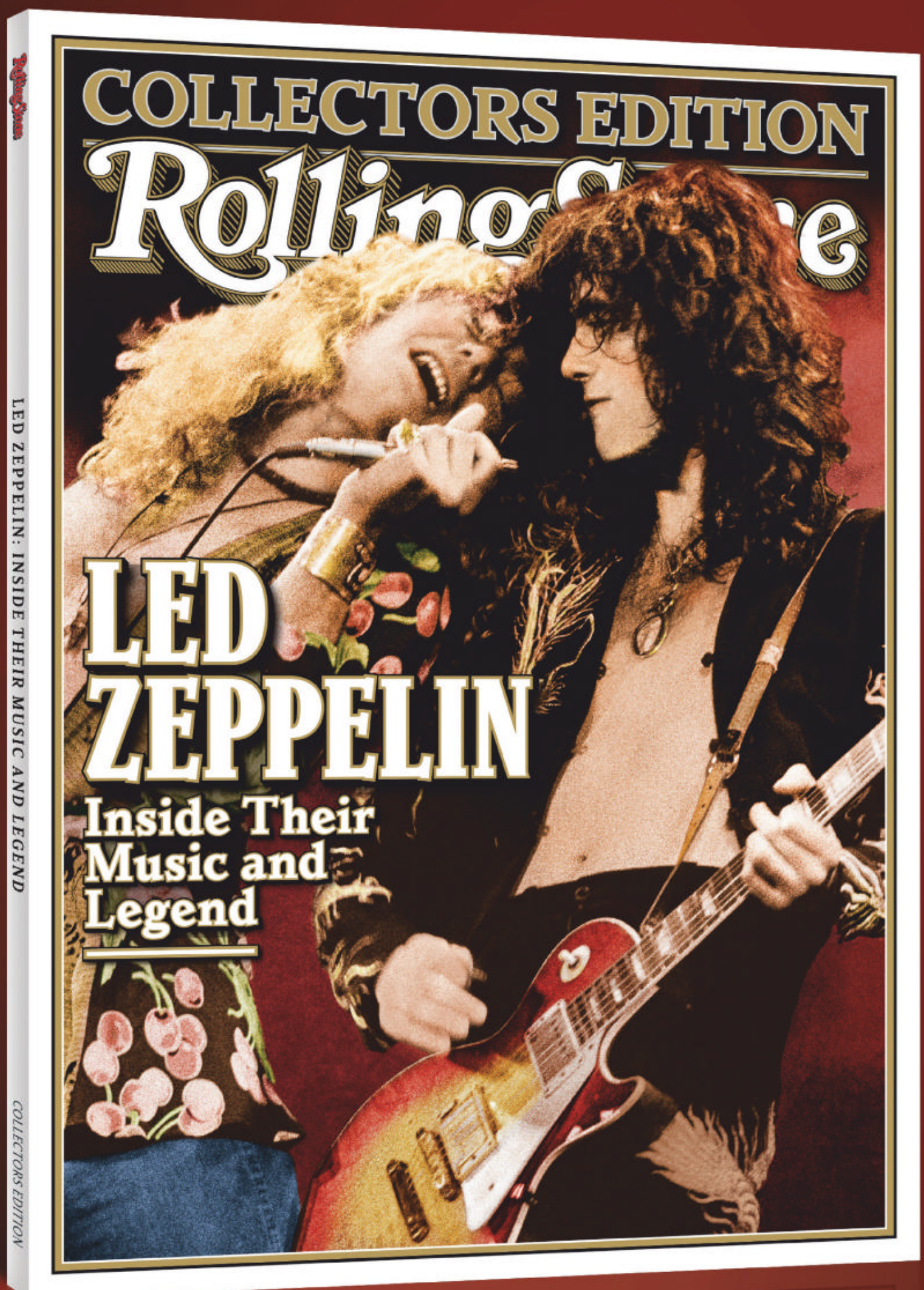
She points out that using the fairy-tale success story of Yellowstone's ecosystem recovery to apply to statewide management is problematic, because trophic cascades aren't such tidy stories; they're huge and complicated. And the park is an isolated ecosystem – people aren't living with wolves. "I'm not against controlling some number of wolves to keep the population happy," Sells says. "But what's going on? It's just a slaughter."

Most Montanans I've spoken to agree. But in this kind of political atmosphere, it will take courage from leadership to change wolves' fate – or a change in leadership altogether in voting Gianforte out of office. "He doesn't understand – nor appreciate – the true intrinsic value of what Montana has had, and what it could have in the future, under the right leadership," says Roberts.

Montana's history runs far deeper as a purple state than a crimson one, and thanks to citizens standing up to wealthy magnates and corrupt politicians bent on exploiting the land in the past, it enjoys gold-standard public lands and stream access, and a rare constitutional right to a clean and healthful environment. Montanans could still surprise the country on this issue as well.

"Our wildlife shouldn't be a political debate," says Defenders of Wildlife's Clark. "It's not Republican or Democrat. It's what we do as Americans. It's what we do as citizens for our next generation."

COURTESY OF DAN HELTERLINE



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FOSSIL FUEL GANGSTER

Putin's war is financed by Russia's vast oil-and-gas wealth, but the conflict may signal the endgame for the carbon mafia

BY JEFF GOODELL

FOR DECADES, world leaders and Big Oil CEOs were happy to turn a blind eye to Russian President Vladimir Putin's autocratic impulses and fantasies of empire building. They were all fossil-fuel junkies, hooked on the easy money of oil and gas, and Putin had plenty of it. They helped finance pipelines and drilling rigs, and then bought as much oil and gas as he would sell them. For Putin, the cash from fossil fuels fired up his darkest ambitions. It not only helped him build the military force that he sent into Ukraine, it also gave him the means to stash billions in offshore banks that he believed would allow him to weather any economic fallout from the war.

This was pretty much business as usual in the twilight of the fossil-fuel age. Oil and gas have long been controlled by petro-state thugs who use their money and power in unsavory ways, from throttling global economic growth to sabotaging international agreements to reduce carbon emissions (and if inquisitive journalists like Saudi dissident Jamal Khashoggi ask too many questions, they end up cut into pieces with a bone saw). Meanwhile, Western leaders ritualistically vow to break their dependence on fossil fuels with hollow calls for "energy independence," while at the same time showing no reservations about invading Middle Eastern countries like Iraq to secure oil supplies. Here in the U.S., rallying cries like "Drill, baby, drill" just fatten the bottom line of Big Oil while deepening our addiction to fossil fuels.

But when Putin started shelling civilians in Ukraine, everything changed. Maybe it was the courage of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. Maybe it was the real-time suffering of Ukrainians, captured on millions of cellphones and broadcast around the world. ExxonMobil, Shell, and BP all ceased operations in Russia before their corporate names could be splattered in blood. Exxon was the last to go, pulling out of oil-and-gas production in Russia and promising to end any future investments in the country.

> "Those who are arguing that we should invest in more fossil-fuel infrastructure are either evil or stupid."

Two weeks after Putin's army marched into Ukraine, President Biden announced a ban on U.S. imports of Russian oil. Although the U.S. gets only about three percent of its oil from Russia, the move, combined with other economic sanctions against Russia, signaled that Russian oil is the equivalent of blood diamonds or elephant tusks – taboo commodities in the Western world. For Europe, the war marked the beginning of the end of a co-dependency that was always bound to lead to tragedy. "European leaders understood that Putin was a volatile character, but it was a relationship they thought they could manage," says Nikos Tsafos, the James R. Schlesinger Chair in Energy and Geopolitics at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a think tank in Washington, D.C. "They were wrong."

A Russian tank destroyed by Ukrainian forces

ANATOLII STEPANOV/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Among other things, Putin miscalculated how fast the world is changing. Industrial nations are in the midst of what energy geeks like to call "a great transition" away from fossil fuels and toward clean-energy sources. It is driven by the simple and brutal understanding that if the rich, Western world continues to burn fossil fuels in the future the way it has in the past, we will literally cook the planet, making it uninhabitable for life as we know it today. If there is any good news to come out of the horrific carnage inflicted by this war, it's this: Instead of slowing the transition to clean energy, Putin's invasion of Ukraine may well have supercharged it. And however the war ends, Putin will pay the price. Russian oil and gas is now forever linked to autocracy, war crimes, and human carnage. "The war marks the end of Russia as an energy superpower," says Tsafos.

It also marked the opening of a new front in the climate fight. When the Russian army rolled into Ukraine, climate science and geopolitics fused. As Ukrainian scientist Svitlana Krakovka put it in remarks during an Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change forum held (coincidentally) as Russian soldiers marched over the border: "Human-induced climate change and the war on Ukraine have the same roots: fossil fuels."

Putin's invasion has already hurt Russia, and in the long run, "the war marks the end of Russia as an energy superpower," says one expert.

MAXIM SHEMETOV/POOL/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

The urgency of the climate crisis was underscored by the latest IPCC report, which, with doomsday levels of irony, was released the same week that Putin invaded. "The rise in weather and climate extremes," the report notes, has already led to "irreversible impacts." Heat waves have become more extreme, droughts deeper, wildfires more frequent, sea levels are rising faster. These changes are "contributing to humanitarian crises" that are driving people from all regions of the world out of their homes. Those who have done the least to cause the problem are likely suffering the most from it. So far, the feeble attempts to adapt have been pathetically inadequate and "focused more on planning rather than implementation."

Russia will not be exempt from disruption, the IPCC report made clear. Melting permafrost in the far north caused one of the worst environmental disasters in the country's recent history. In 2020, during a record-breaking heat wave, the subsiding earth contributed to a storage tank breaking open, spilling around 20,000 tons of diesel into rivers and lakes near Norilsk, a city of 175,000 built entirely on permafrost. As the permafrost continues to thaw across Russia's frozen north, the ground's ability to support buildings will degrade by up to a third by 2050, creating an infrastructure disaster that one study estimates could cost $132 billion.

Predictably, Republicans and their corrupt band of climate crooks and deniers immediately used the invasion of Ukraine as an excuse to deepen our dependence on fossil fuels, not free ourselves from it. They willfully ignored the simple truth that there are better, cheaper ways of powering our world with oil, gas, and coal. To them fossil fuels are the energy equivalent of testosterone. Florida Sen. Marco Rubio tweeted that Biden's "war on American oil and gas" made Putin stronger. South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem told Fox News that "from the very day [Biden] got into the White House, he gave Putin all the power."

It was all bullshit, of course. "The Republicans are arguing that you can either have climate-change action or you can have security, but you can't have both," says Sharon Burke, a former Assistant Secretary of Defense under President Obama. "And that's just not true. The climate policies are not causing this problem and have nothing to do with this problem." Or as Rep. Sean Casten, a Democrat from Illinois and former clean-energy entrepreneur, put it: "Those who are arguing that we should invest in more fossil-fuel infrastructure are either evil or stupid."

Post-invasion, leaders of the European Union moved quickly to cut ties with Putin. The Nord Stream 2 pipeline, a massive new project to bring natural gas to Europe, was abandoned. Ads for heat pumps, which can replace gas-fired furnaces, appeared in French railroad stations. At the time of this writing, European leaders were resisting a full ban on fossil-fuel imports from Russia – German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said Russian gas is of "essential importance" to the daily lives of its citizens.

But in the long run, the unwinding of the EU's dependence on Russian energy is irreversible and is further evidence that the climate crisis is driving economic and political movements that are hard to see – until a war breaks out. "It's not just our climate that's changing," says Erin Sikorsky, the director of the Center for Climate and Security in Washington, D.C. "It's our geopolitics, too."

The balance of economic power is also shifting fast. Tesla, the leading manufacturer of electric vehicles, is worth more than the Big Three Detroit automakers combined. Big Oil is scrambling to invest in clean energy. African nations are finding themselves grappling with rich investors eager to exploit their resources. Especially in demand are minerals like lithium, nickel, cobalt, manganese, and graphite, which are crucial to the batteries that power everything from cellphones to electric vehicles. "Seventy percent of the world's cobalt right now is produced from the Democratic Republic of Congo," says Burke. "That is deeply problematic for the Congolese and everyone else."

But if the war in Ukraine proves anything, it's that the old fossil-fuel thugs are not going to go down quietly. Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro is allowing mining companies to pillage the Amazon. In the Middle East, the oil cartels have so far refused Biden's request to help stabilize global oil prices. And even if the war in Ukraine does mark the end of Russia's reign as an energy superpower, the dangerous truth is Putin still has enough nuclear bombs to end civilization as we know it. "After the war," says Tsafos, "Russia is going to be isolated and their economy decimated." He compares Russia's future to other cornered nations like Venezuela, Iran, and North Korea. "Anyone who thinks an isolated Russia that doesn't sell anything to the world is going to be a fun neighbor – well, let's talk in 30 years and see how that worked out."

PERMAFROST

Many Russian cities are built on frozen tundra, and as the world warms and the ground melts, infrastructure becomes unstable; one study says the cost could rise to $132 billion.

BAD. NEWS.

The Rise and Fall of Jeff Zucker

How the media titan's thirst for power fueled bad actors and brought America to a new low

BY TATIANA SIEGEL

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ILLUSTRATION BY MIKE MCQUADE

NEW TONIC

BREAKING

CUOMO

LIVE

THE RAINY MORNING of March 28, 2020, President Trump addressed a phalanx of journalists outside the White House following a call with New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo. "There's a possibility that sometime today, we'll do a quarantine – short-term, two weeks – of New York, probably New Jersey, and certain parts of Connecticut," he said while clutching his umbrella. "This would be an enforceable quarantine. You know, I'd rather not do it, but we may need it."

Hours later, Cuomo was asked during his daily press conference about Trump's comments. "From a medical point of view, I don't know what you'd be accomplishing," he offered with a shrug.

But as sunset approached, the governor appeared on CNN with a much more forceful assessment, predicting that a quarantine would unleash "chaos and mayhem" in the tristate area, and homing in on the financial implications of such a move. "I think it would paralyze the economy," he said. "I think it would shock the economic markets in a way we've never seen before."

CNN anchor Ana Cabrera teed up a seemingly tailor-made question: "What would this mean for the stock market? Would it have to shut down?"

"Oh, it would drop like a stone," Cuomo insisted. "That would drop this economy in a way that wouldn't recover for months, if not years."

What viewers did not know is that in the hours between Cuomo's Albany press conference and his CNN dinner-hour appearance, he corresponded directly with CNN leadership. Firing off a text to the network's top marketing and communications executive, Allison Gollust – who had also been his own publicist a few years prior – Cuomo wrote, in an apparent reference to CNN President Jeff Zucker, "Ask Jeff to call me plz." Zucker's representatives say he has "no record" of speaking to Cuomo that day. Regardless, Cuomo landed on a talking point sure to grab Trump's attention. And Zucker certainly knew exactly which levers to pull when it came to the president, given their long and lucrative relationship via the reality show *The Apprentice*.

About 30 minutes before Cuomo appeared on CNN by remote feed, Gollust emailed a programming staffer, cc'ing Zucker, and offered the governor as a last-minute guest to talk about Trump's proposed quarantine. She then told Zucker that the governor would like to speak with him. When the segment ended, Gollust texted Cuomo: "Well done . . . Cuomo-W. Trump-L."

A representative for the former governor declined to comment. Risa Heller, a spokeswoman for both Zucker and Gollust, says in a statement that "Jeff never advised Andrew Cuomo," and that the notion that Gollust was "laundering advice to the Governor" was "far-fetched" and "patently ridiculous." But two sources familiar with the matter dispute this. To observers both outside and inside CNN, the network brass's interactions with the governor represented the worst kind of journalistic lapse – "one of the most clear-cut ethical breaches you could think of," says University of Missouri journalism professor Ryan Thomas. News outlets are supposed to expose the wrongdoings of politicians, not serve as their publicists. That's especially true for the network that bills itself as "The Most Trusted Name in News."

Zucker was ousted from CNN on Feb. 2, 2022, citing a previously unreported affair with Gollust. The relationship was unearthed amid an internal investigation into CNN anchor Chris Cuomo, who was fired last December for helping his brother navigate sexual-misconduct allegations. But, as was revealed days later in a statement by WarnerMedia CEO Jason Kilar, that probe turned up not only Zucker and Gollust's affair, but also violations of journalistic best practices around the couple's cozy relationship with the governor. The initial suggestion was that these failings were recent – lapses that took place during the extraordinary times of the pandemic. But according to dozens of former colleagues who spoke with ROLLING STONE, they marked the culmination of Zucker's three-plus decades spent in a craven pursuit of ratings and power, a career that would foster a toxic culture at two networks and fan the flames of the disinformation age along the way.

At NBC, Zucker put Trump in front of millions of American eyeballs for 14 seasons, positioning him as a lovably irascible titan of business and effectively turning *The Apprentice* into a shadow campaign for the future leader of the free world. It was a union spawned in 2003, when Trump was a semifailed businessman looking for an image overhaul, and Zucker, then president of NBC Entertainment, was apparently eager to acquiesce. To cross-promote that show, he installed Trump as a regular guest on *Today*, where he was exalted like a Nobel laureate before an audience of America's stay-at-home moms. And, of course, Zucker presided over Matt Lauer's heyday, when the *Today* anchor preyed on vulnerable young staffers, seemingly with no fear.

By the time he got to CNN, Zucker was both kingmaker and king. He brought in on-air talent like Clarissa Ward and, more recently, Chris Wallace; launched landmark docuseries like *Anthony Bourdain: Parts Unknown*; and turned a moribund digital news operation into a scoop machine. He also made a $6-million-a-year star of his close friend Chris Cuomo, who has since been accused of sexual misconduct in addition to journalistic missteps. (Cuomo denies the sexual-assault and harassment allegations, and maintains that any ethical transgressions were sanctioned by Zucker and Gollust.) Zucker bucked conflict-of-interest protocol to have Chris interview his brother, shamelessly capitalizing on Andrew's rising national profile during the pandemic. All the while, sources say, Zucker was conducting his affair with his subordinate, Gollust, in plain sight, bringing her from one network to the other, promoting her – and approving her compensation – at every stage of his ascension. She was a key player in Cuomogate, providing talking points to the governor – for whom she worked briefly between stints with Zucker – and relaying his preferred topics to CNN producers, including on that day in March 2020. It was all, sources say, part of a pattern of behavior Zucker had been nurturing for years.

"Jeff will do anything for good ratings and buzz, journalistic ethics be damned," says one former NBC comrade. "He's like, 'Everybody's talking about it. It's great TV.' But great TV doesn't always translate to great journalism."

Tom Touchet, who was a successor to Zucker as executive producer of *Today* from 2002 to 2005, often collided with Zucker and Trump during the early years of *The Apprentice* on NBC. His assessment of Zucker is more pointed: "Jeff and Trump are essentially the same person – the ability to self-promote and be wildly duplicitous They are very similar. And vindictive. They're not gonna forget anything."

ZUCKER AND GOLLUST'S March 28 communications with Gov. Cuomo may be among the 100,000 texts and emails swept up in CNN's investigation into Chris Cuomo's journalistic processes, conducted by the law firm Cravath, Swaine & Moore. When the probe wrapped on Feb. 13, Kilar's statement called it "comprehensive and definitive," noting that the investigators had "found violations of Company policies, including CNN's News Standards and Practices, by Jeff Zucker, Allison Gollust, and Chris Cuomo."

While Zucker had maintained his resignation was a result of the exposed affair, plot twists abound. First off, both parties claimed their relationship had only recently turned romantic. ("Jeff and Allison have had a professional partnership for over 22 years. It evolved over time and became romantic during Covid. Any speculation to the contrary is false," Heller says.) But multiple colleagues say it began decades ago.

According to one source familiar with the CNN investigation and another who is a Democratic operative, Gollust's ongoing connections to Gov. Cuomo also raised eyebrows. Two sources familiar with the matter say Gollust and the governor exchanged texts in which they agreed to meet up for drinks on multiple occasions in 2019 and 2020. In early 2020, several months after his split from partner Sandra Lee, Cuomo asked Gollust, "You don't want to see me now that I'm single?" She replied, "A drink with you would be the best date I've had in a while." Four months later, he fired off a text to Gollust suggesting he be her "pool boy." She responded that she'd welcome that scenar-

Senior writer TATIANA SIEGEL *covers the media and Hollywood for* ROLLING STONE.

4
8

LEADING MAN

Matt Lauer's relationships with vulnerable young staffers were said to be a well-known secret throughout Zucker's tenure at NBC.

WOMAN ON TOP

Gollust (far right), with Zucker and Tom Brokaw in 2016, was promoted at every stage of Zucker's ascendancy at NBC and CNN. Their affair came to light last year.

TIMES LIKE THESE

Zucker's interactions with Gov. Andrew Cuomo during the pandemic came under scrutiny as part of CNN's investigation into the conduct of anchor Chris Cuomo.

PREVIOUS SPREAD, PHOTOGRAPH USED IN ILLUSTRATION: MIKE COPPOLA/GETTY IMAGES. THIS SPREAD, FROM TOP: JARED SISKIN/PATRICK MCMULLAN; GETTY IMAGES; ROBIN PLATZER/FILMMAGIC; BRAD BARKET/GETTY IMAGES

io, and they set up a call. When their texting resumed, Gollust wrote, "That was fun. Sleep well." ("It's no secret that Allison and Governor Cuomo had a friendly relationship after Allison briefly worked for him in 2012," says Heller. "For Rolling Stone to suggest through innuendo and creative syntax – and no evidence – that there was a sexual relationship between the two in 2020 is disgusting, sexist, and patently false. In fact, Allison was never in the same room as the governor during 2020." A representative for Cuomo adds, "Allison and the governor were former colleagues and friends, never had a romantic relationship, and it is impossible to have two sources saying otherwise because it is a total fabrication.")

Gollust's texts went beyond friends' banter. When a rumor circulated that Trump was about to shut down New York City, Gollust invited the governor to come on CNN's *New Day* the next morning and "squash it." She quipped to her former boss, "I'm pretty sure I stopped being your publicist 8 years ago, but apparently I still am." On another occasion, he asked her to critique his press conference.

Heller says, "These are innocuous, mundane conversations that are being spun into a nefarious tale." But she acknowledges that Gollust asked the governor to help her friend cut through bureaucratic red tape to open a birthing center in Manhattan. Months later, Heller confirms, Gollust hit up Cuomo with a request involving Billy Joel, who'd once hosted a Cuomo-campaign fundraiser. She prefaced it with "I never ask you for favors, but…," to which Cuomo replied, "Yes, u do ask me for favors, and that's okay. It's mutual."

"It was clear that she leveraged the relationship [with Andrew Cuomo]," says the Democratic operative. "There was a consistent exchange of favors between them."

The inappropriate relationship, coupled with clear signs of collaboration, sealed Gollust's fate. On Feb. 15, she was cut loose from CNN. (WarnerMedia declined to comment on questions about Gollust and Cuomo's relationship and pointed to Kilar's statement regarding the investigation. Heller insists that CNN's characterization of Gollust's journalistic integrity is a "retrofitted justification for an unmerited dismissal.")

IF IT ALL SEEMS too incestuous to be true, it was hardly unusual within the culture that followed Zucker wherever he went. For all his many journalistic wins, a brazen disregard for workplace ethics seemed to envelop his newsrooms – a function, perhaps, of his early successes and the privileges he enjoyed along the way.

Raised by a cardiologist and a schoolteacher outside of Miami, Zucker graduated from Harvard in 1986, and three years later became a field producer for *Today*. Andrea Smith, a then-producer of the show who had been with the network since 1975, trained the new recruit on how to produce and edit a story. "I saw what salary they were giving him right out of the gate, and it was like 10 times what I was making, maybe more, and here I was being his tutor," the Emmy winner recalls. "Men were treated so much better than women in those days, because that's just the way it was."

Just three years after his auspicious start, Zucker became the boss when he was named executive producer of *Today* at the age of 26. The producers bought him a kids' lunchbox because he was so young, and he was quickly dubbed a wunderkind. His arrival ushered in the golden era of the morning show. "He was the best producer I ever worked under," says Smith. "He was unparalleled at motivating the producers under him, and just knew how to manage a show, and knew how to get people to do their best."

His Midas touch included helming production in the now-iconic streetside studio, and assembling a killer team that included Katie Couric and Matt Lauer. A key addition off-camera was Gollust, who, according to her bio, joined the network in 1996 – the same year Zucker married another NBC employee, Caryn Nathanson – and made her leap to senior publicist within a year. It was well-known that Gollust and Zucker were more than colleagues, NBC alums say. They frequently flew on the NBC private jet together with another *Today* colleague, who sources say was also involved in a barely hidden relationship with a married top news executive. It was around this time that Lauer, the rising star, began targeting young, vulnerable women, particularly assistants, temps, and receptionists.

Addie Zinone was one of those women who came forward with accusations against Lauer in 2017. When she began interning at *Today* in 1999, the show was at the height of its popularity. Still, there was a much darker side. In 2000, Zinone was a production assistant and Lauer a newly married superstar when he first hit on her. They began a consensual relationship that she now attributes to that gross imbalance in power. The affair included encounters in Lauer's office, a now-familiar MO for the anchor.

While Zinone describes Zucker as "nothing but professional" toward her, she is skeptical that he didn't know about his star employee's reputation. "Matt's behavior was despicable and ongoing, and that doesn't happen in a vacuum," she says today. "A lot of what we've heard about Matt was in-house, meaning he had to feel protection from those above him."

"It was totally an old-boys' club," says Smith. "Everybody knew about the affairs and everything going on. The idea that [network brass] would say, 'Oh, we had no idea [about Lauer's conduct]' is very funny. Everybody talked about it. All of the highest-up executives at NBC knew." (Heller strongly denies this, saying Zucker "was entirely unaware of Matt Lauer's behavior while the two overlapped at NBC. If he had been, he would have taken action immediately.")

By the time Tom Touchet arrived in 2002 from ABC News, the atmosphere was "like *Mad Men*,"

he says. Zucker had become president of NBC Entertainment a couple of years prior, and with another promotion in 2003, was in charge of the news division, too. Touchet goes on to describe the Athens Olympics in 2004 as "the weirdest melting pot of everybody sleeping together."

Lauer in particular acted more boldly as time went on. In 2005, Smith sent the anchor a thank-you note via an internal communications channel after he'd handled a particularly tricky interview. His response took her by surprise. "Are you buttering me up?" Lauer wrote, according to Smith. Then he began detailing where he wanted to spread butter on her body, including her thighs. He ended the message with a demand: "Wear that skirt. It's easy to get off."

Smith was confused. She looked down at the leggings she was wearing like she did most days. Skirts were not a staple of her wardrobe. She quickly figured out that the message wasn't meant for her. Instead, she realized, it was intended for a young receptionist who had a similar name.

Smith says she felt it was a professional "death knell" that she'd found out about the affair. In the environment cultivated under Zucker, according to Smith, Touchet, and others, it was unspoken but understood that powerful men were making moves on underlings who would be committing career suicide to report them. Lauer's reputation was well-known internally by then, yet he continued to be put on the highest pedestal at the network. (Even powerful women lost if they crossed him. In 2011, NBC executives gave Ann Curry the boot just a year into her stint as *Today* co-anchor reportedly in order to entice Lauer, who'd made his disdain for her clear, to re-up his contract.) Smith says she was pushed out in 2006, after more than 30 years with NBC. She believes the "dangerous" information she'd acquired about Lauer could have been a factor. (NBC vehemently denied knowledge of Lauer's conduct at the time.)

While doubt remains about what Zucker knew of Lauer's behavior, NBC's top dog offered a clue at a 2008 Friars Club roast of the anchor that was dubbed "three hours of dick and pussy jokes," many at the expense of Curry. "It's just good to see Matt up here and not under my desk," Zucker cracked. "I don't want to say Matt's a germaphobe, but he's the only guy I know who uses Purell both before *and* after he masturbates."

Even after all that later became public about Lauer, Zucker remained friendly with the #MeToo pariah. In 2019, he and Gollust attended Zucker's 54th-birthday party at New York's McKittrick Hotel. Couric's tell-all 2021 memoir, *Going There,* describes the threesome palling around at Don Lemon's 2019 engagement party in the Hamptons.

"I think Jeff probably would have hired Matt [at CNN] if there hadn't been so much blowback," says one on-air personality who worked with both. "Jeff likes to repay loyalty by hiring people."

LAUER WASN'T the only bad actor Zucker enabled. His bromance with Trump was in full swing in the mid-aughts, their co-dependent lust for ratings fueling noxious behavior. On Feb. 3, 2005, Trump settled into a plush chair at Studio 1A in Rockefeller Plaza, ready to cross-promote *The Apprentice* alongside that show's producer, Mark Burnett, who was appearing remotely from L.A. Lauer affectionately referred to Trump as "the Donald," while the guests prattled about the series' soon-to-be-launched spinoff with Martha Stewart. Then Lauer did the unthinkable: Noting that *The Apprentice*'s audience numbers had been on a downward trajectory after a smash-hit first season, he asked Trump, "Why do you think that is?"

Trump spun the truth – claiming the ratings were actually up, and "in the number-one demographic, are very substantial" – but Lauer pushed back. "The information I have is [that] in the premiere the ratings were better, but since then they've been down about 20 percent. That's not what you have?"

After the segment, Trump stormed into the control room, orange face turned red, "and had a hissy fit," according to Touchet, who was then running *Today*. Zucker followed, and, at first, commended Touchet in front of the staff for pressing their guest on a difficult question. Then, Touchet says, Zucker pulled him aside and – borrowing a line from Trump – told him, "You're fucking fired."

"Trump was the worst guest we ever had to deal with, and he was serially abusive to my staff," Touchet says. "I heard from Jeff and Mark Burnett daily. Trump was on the show constantly."

Within a few months, Touchet says he was officially shown the door with years left on his contract. ("Tom Touchet was not fired because of any interview with Donald Trump," Heller says.) Later that year, *Today* literally rolled out a red carpet for Trump before one of his appearances on the show, playing "The Imperial March" – Darth Vader's theme from *Star Wars* – as he walked on, with Al Roker introducing him as the "king of the universe." Jokey though it may have seemed, gambits like this helped to burnish the image of Trump created via *The Apprentice*: that of an accomplished, authoritative leader to be both feared and lauded. For millions of Americans outside New York City – where Trump was largely viewed as nothing more than a carnival barker – the cartoon character that Zucker and Co. had drummed up to goose ratings was becoming real.

Given that Trump had previously expressed political ambitions (including a brief presidential run on the Reform Party ticket in 2000), this TV-star glow-up was dangerous enough. But the reality behind the scenes was even worse: Trump's growing stardom seemed to amplify some of his most insidious qualities. Already a reputed racist who decades earlier had been sued for housing discrimination against Black renters and had called for the death penalty against five Black and Latino teens wrongly accused of rape in the notorious Central Park Jogger case, Trump reportedly used the n-word liberally on the set of *The Apprentice,* according to sources in former contestant Omarosa Manginault Newman's book about her time in the Trump White House, *Unhinged*. It was also around this time that the infamous *Access Hollywood* tape, where Trump casually bragged to host Billy Bush (during an interview for one NBC program about his guest spot on another NBC program, the soap *Days of Our Lives*) about grabbing beautiful women "by the pussy" was recorded.

As with Lauer, it's unclear how much Zucker knew about his cash cow's bad behavior in the studio, but Trump's audaciousness suggests he wasn't exactly keeping his proclivities a secret. Yet Zucker continued to use other NBC programs to both feed and siphon Trump's celebrity – with dire consequences.

"By putting Trump in [the] pseudo-factual setting [of a] reality show, Zucker helped to create the Trump phenomenon," says Columbia University journalism professor Samuel Freedman. "And the whole country is now paying a terrible price."

By the time Zucker had ascended to president and CEO of NBC Universal in 2007, his and Trump's worlds were ever more intertwined. The Miss USA and Miss Universe pageants had become a joint venture between NBC and Trump. That year, NBC Universal reportedly made a $10,000 donation to the Trump Foundation. Trump's 2007 business how-to book, *Think Big and Kick Ass,* even cited a comment Zucker had made about how, in a post-*Friends* world, Trump was NBC's new Jennifer Aniston. ("He said very, very nicely, 'Donald Trump may not have hair as good as [her], but he's got great ratings.' ")

Still, Zucker's fiefdom was crumbling from the inside. Despite all of the cross-promotion, *The Apprentice* ratings had continued to slip, along with the rest of NBC's prime-time lineup. *Today*'s numbers had also taken a hit. The headaches piled up. In 2009, Zucker engineered Jay Leno's disastrous move to prime time, only to reverse course four months later and move him back to late night, where an already installed Conan O'Brien was heading up *The Tonight Show.*

Corporate winds were shifting, too. The next year, Zucker was shown the door ahead of Comcast closing its 51 percent acquisition of Universal. Though he'd received a golden parachute pegged at $30 million to $40 million, he was facing his first career comeuppance.

Meanwhile, as one door closed for Zucker, Trump was walking through the one *The Apprentice* had opened, starting to lay the groundwork for a political future. Speaking at the Conservative Political Action Conference in 2011, he floated a possible presidential run – and, in a taste of what was to come, began promoting the Obama birther conspiracy. He later reversed course and said he wouldn't run, deciding to milk the promotional machine of *The Apprentice* – which also earned him $427 million over its run – a little longer.

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"Jeff liked gimmicks. The gimmick of the missing plane, the gimmick of Trump, and Andrew and Chris Cuomo and their dog-and-pony show. This is an important story. People are dying. It's not about 'Who does Mom love more?' It was ridiculous."

PLAYING THE TRUMP CARD

Zucker and Trump were friends for two decades leading up to Trump's presidency. As recently as 2017, Zucker told a journalist, "I like Donald."

NICK HUNT/PATRICK MCMULLAN/GETTY IMAGES

AFTER A COUPLE of years executive-producing his old colleague Katie Couric on her short-lived Disney-ABC syndicated talk show, *Katie,* Zucker left in January 2013 to run CNN – a job Trump bragged he'd secured for his old friend. The degree of Trump's involvement is murky. Beyond a couple of tweets endorsing Zucker ("Great move by CNN if they sign Jeff Zucker. He was responsible for me and The Apprentice on NBC – became #1 show!"), a source familiar with the interaction says Trump did put in a good word with then-Turner Broadcasting System chairman and CEO Phil Kent at a gala dinner for the American Turkish Society in 2012, calling Zucker "a genius." (Kent declined to comment for this piece, but has recently told friends that he has no regrets about his decision.)

As CNN president, Zucker's first hires included Chris Cuomo and Gollust, who resigned from her position in the governor's office, where she'd been working less than six months. At first, she reported to the network's senior vice president for Turner Broadcasting, but within seven months, she began reporting directly to Zucker.

Unlike NBC, whose policy stated that supervisor-subordinate romances were "strongly discouraged," CNN's rules were far more strict. According to the company's code of conduct, "To avoid a conflict of interest, employees must not hire or supervise (directly or indirectly) someone with whom they have a personal relationship, and if you are in a position to influence the employment, advancement, or hiring of someone with whom you have a personal relationship . . . you must inform the HR department in advance of taking any action." But as network president, Zucker had oversight of the HR department, and apparently didn't care about flouting these rules.

While inside the network some people resented the Gollust relationship, Zucker appears to have been widely liked by CNN staffers, particularly the high-paid anchors whose careers he championed. (Don Lemon called him "the backbone, the glue, and the spirit of this company, the man who I personally credit with change in my life, the man who believed in me when nobody else did.") But as the years went on, Zucker was taking fire from outside critics for giving a disproportionate amount of airtime to his onetime superstar, Trump. In the lead-up to the 2016 election, CNN was mocked for its breathless coverage of the candidate's rallies, which the network frequently aired from start to finish. Sometimes producers went so far as to leave a camera fixed on an empty podium with a chyron that read: "Trump About to Take the Stage." Trump also regularly guested on the network's political shows, having reasonably civil conversations with its anchors about his divisive rhetoric. The tactic worked: CNN routinely trounced rivals MSNBC and Fox in ratings during the election cycle, and boasted its most-watched year ever in 2016.

At a December 2016 dinner held at the Harvard Institute of Politics, Zucker was heckled and booed when the conversation turned to CNN's coverage of Trump. "The crowd did not react positively," says one attendee. "It wasn't just GOP people. It was people on the left who were upset over CNN's role in giving that kind of attention to Trump." But Zucker appeared to be neither surprised nor contrite. Instead, he argued that Trump was great for ratings and profitability. And he insisted that his old *Apprentice* buddy was the only Republican candidate willing to call into CNN's morning show. "Cable news in general, and CNN in particular, should not be held responsible for the fact that Donald Trump said yes to those interviews and the others didn't," he said.

Sources say that in the run-up to the 2016 election, Zucker and Trump spoke directly about coverage, as well as through disgraced Trump lawyer Michael Cohen, who was a frequent guest on CNN. Cohen denied any involvement to ROLLING STONE. Still, in a 2020 segment of *Tucker Carlson Tonight,* the host ran audio clips he said were from a 2016 phone call between Cohen and Zucker. In the recording, the CNN exec praised Trump's campaigning, offered advice for that night's Republican debate, and said he wanted to discuss giving Trump a weekly show.

To many observers, Zucker's legacy is inextricably linked with the 45th president, to his detriment. "Overall, I think Zucker is a very flawed figure," says NYU journalism professor Jay Rosen. "He definitely participated in the onslaught of Trump coverage that was part of his rise to power. He also turned CNN into an extremely adversarial network to Trump when that was needed. That's part of his legacy as well. Which is not to say that they balance each other. But you have to reckon with both of those things."

But even when the tone of the relationship between Trump and CNN shifted, Zucker couldn't resist bragging that Trump's animosity was personal. It went back to their "strong, 20-year friendship," as he explained on an episode of David Axelrod's podcast, before crowing without a hint of irony that when Trump didn't get the "preferential treatment" he expected based on the pair's long history, he turned on the network.

Of course, Trump is a man known to thrive on negative attention, so CNN's hammering of his presidency still played directly into his hands. As the supposedly neutral network turned more partisan in its take on him, Trump painted himself as a victim of bias, branding CNN, and later most mainstream media, as "fake news." The daily Trump-versus-CNN cage match set the stage for the misinformation age, with large swaths of the population eventually questioning anything the network reported, from Covid death rates to 2020 election results. And still, Zucker couldn't quite quit their co-dependent relationship, knowing that wall-to-wall Trump equaled stellar ratings, even as it contributed to the collapse of discourse in the U.S. "Jeff is responsible for the death of nuance," as one NBC News alum who worked with Zucker puts it.

AS THE PANDEMIC raged in March 2020, Andrew Cuomo's star was rising, and he was touted as a potential challenger to Joe Biden for the Democratic ticket. Zucker, seeing a new ratings bonanza, reversed course on an internal policy barring Chris Cuomo from interviewing his brother. "You get trust from authenticity and relatability and vulnerability," Zucker told *The New York Times*' Ben Smith of the decision. "That's what the brothers Cuomo are giving us right now."

The on-air exchanges between the Cuomos were often cringeworthy, like when Chris asked his older sibling: "With all of this adulation that you're getting for doing your job, are you thinking about running for president? Tell the audience."

"Jeff liked gimmicks," says one former anchor who worked with Zucker, citing CNN's incessant coverage when a Malaysian passenger jet disappeared from radar in 2014. "The whole gimmick of the missing plane, the gimmick of Trump, and the gimmick of Andrew Cuomo and Chris Cuomo having their little dog-and-pony show. This is an important story. People are dying. It's not about, 'Who does mom love more?' It was ridiculous, so non-journalistic at every turn. There's no excuse for it at all."

For a time, Zucker's abuses of power went unchecked; CNN operated like an island within the massive portfolio of WarnerMedia (as the network's parent company was renamed following AT&T's completed acquisition of [*Cont. on 77*]

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WHAT IS AVAXHOME?

AVAXHOME-

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Miranda Lambert

THE ROLLING STONE INTERVIEW

HER OWN KIND OF COUNTRY

One of this century's best artists goes deep on putting out whatever she wants, her new LGBTQ+ anthem, and why she's proud to be a "shit show"

BY MARISSA R. MOSS

MIRANDA LAMBERT is not used to sitting still, so a few months into pandemic quarantine she and her husband, former NYPD officer Brendan McLoughlin, bought a shiny silver Airstream and headed up the East Coast from Nashville. They made "campfire casserole," a specialty of Lambert's dad, drank wine on the pop-up table, and named the gleaming beast "The Sheriff."

"My stepson lives in New York, so we were trying to figure out creative ways to get to him," Lambert says, sitting in a conference room down the hall from where her band is loudly warming up for rehearsal. While the country superstar usually gravitates toward vintage campers, McLoughlin had urged his wife to swap for a new model – Lambert was hesitant until she realized the modern versions come with air-conditioning. "It was a blast. We mostly stayed at KOAs," she says, referring to the nationwide campground system. "It was such a removal from being 'Miranda Lambert,' not to sound douchey."

Turns out, she needed the break: Miranda Lambert has been Miranda Lambert for nearly two decades, after appearing on *Nashville Star* and releasing her label debut, *Kerosene*, in 2005, which established her as an artist deeply unafraid to follow her own rules, co-write almost all her own songs, and (lyrically) burn down the occasional house or two. Since then, she's been one of the most consistent and prolific record makers of any genre, as a solo artist (her eighth album, *Palomino*, is coming April 29) and as a member of the Pistol Annies, with Angaleena Presley and Ashley Monroe. In the past two years alone, she's made a polished pop-rock duet with Elle King ("Drunk (And I Don't Wanna Go Home)," now platinum) and the exquisitely raw *Marfa Tapes*, cut with buddies and fellow Texans Jon Randall and Jack Ingram. She's a fashion entrepreneur, an ally to the LGBTQIA+ community, and a fierce advocate for shelter animals with her MuttNation foundation.

At 38, the child of Lindale, Texas, will spend some time soon evaluating her own legacy: with a Vegas residency called "Velvet Rodeo" at the Planet Hollywood Resort & Casino beginning in September. In true Lambert style, it's the direct opposite of *Palomino*, which is dedicated to the road and the people who inhabit it. Produced by Lambert with Randall and Luke Dick, it's a country-rock journey from the imagination and the heart, complete with an appearance from the B-52's and a Mick Jagger cover.

Lambert, wearing jeans, a Rolling Stones sweatshirt, and a pair of comfy sneakers, is eager – if not a little nervous – to start running through her set before she heads back on the road again. Though she wouldn't mind, post-quarantine, if things were a little easier on the body. "I saw some meme the other day that said, 'Normalize partying your ass off from 5 p.m. to 10 p.m.,'" she says laughing. "And I was totally into that."

I remember a post you shared on Instagram during that Airstream road trip, about how you ate dinner at a nearby fancy restaurant, then slept in your camper. Seems very Miranda.

We were on a lake in Georgia, and there's an amazing KOA there. We stopped and I said, "I don't want to cook tonight, let's find something to eat." I found a nice steakhouse [nearby], and it was at the Ritz. So we drop our trailer, drive to the Ritz, and start talking to some people who asked, "Y'all staying here?" And we said, "No, we're at the campground!" They were like, "You camp in your trailer and eat at the Ritz?" But that's kind of who we are in a nutshell.

Camping and the Ritz; "Drunk" and *Marfa Tapes*; country and rock: The saying "Get yourself a girl who can do both" seems to be built for you.

I love that, because it's how I feel. I've been lucky enough to have a long career where I can have a little freedom creatively, but it's still scary. I want people to accept both and not be like, "Well, that's not country! That's not commercial!" These are just songs

> "I came out at a time where there were 12 blondes on my label. I was like, 'OK, here we go – bitch better stand out somehow.'"

I love, and it doesn't matter where they fit. I hope that's opened some doors for women, especially, to go, "I can put out whatever I want and sound like whatever I want and look like whatever I want. And if I change my mind, that's just what I do."

You've followed that path since *Kerosene*. How do you feel reflecting on that album now?

I've never really strayed too far from *Kerosene,* but I have calmed down a bit. I remember saying to people when I was first playing those honky-tonks in Texas that it was never because I wanted to be famous. I'm a shy kid, an introvert. My goal was longevity. I wanted to be someone who says something important and does it through music, and can stay a long time. I wanted an Emmylou [Harris] career. That's what I wanted, even though some of the roads were long, because I didn't pick the right commercial sound or the right outfit or whatever it was at the time that was hot. I didn't have my first Number One until my third record, and that was OK with me. It was about establishing something.

Why do you think you had such resolve so young?

My heroes did it. The people I was drawn to were the songwriters, the Guy Clarks, the John Prines, the Dollys, the Lorettas. What I grabbed on to was that there's depth, there's truth, there's real, and there's ugly. I came out at a time where there were 12 blondes on my label at once. I was like, "OK, here we go – bitch better stand out somehow." I just stayed the course. It was sometimes painful, but it was important to me. *Marfa Tapes* getting nominated for a Grammy blew my mind. It makes me want to cry, because it's just real moments shared around the campfire.

That album was such a salve for a time when we were missing the rawness of live music, with, I don't want to say imperfections, but—

They were! It was terrifying to put it out. There's no fixes, there's flats, there's cussing, and there's messups. But again, I didn't start out with that perfect Barbie image, so I wouldn't have anything to live up to. I was just like, "I'm going to be a shit show from Day One, and that'll be easier."

You've usually been low-fi at shows. In Vegas, you can ride in from a trapeze if you want.

Make it rain! I've always been very low production, never changed my wardrobe onstage unless I ripped something. I'm very much like, "This is a rock & roll show." But with Vegas, we have to take it up a notch. A wardrobe change? I'm going to have to get used to that. Can we get some Velcro so it's real easy?

Vegas will be about staying still for a bit, but *Palomino* travels the whole country: You hit so many states, meet so many characters. Did it become immediately clear that you were going to take us into all these different worlds? I know you said you started with "Tourist," right?

Luke [Dick] was playing my guitar that's signed by Merle Haggard. That's what made him come up with the stranger line, "There's always been a stranger in my soul." Then we wrote scenes the same weekend, and I was like, "Are we on to something?" Concept records seem so daunting, and sometimes even annoying. But this was more of "Maybe we just go places in this record because we can't physically." I've never gotten to do an album like this where I consciously go, "Who are we meeting next? Where are we going?" I loved picturing the map in my head.

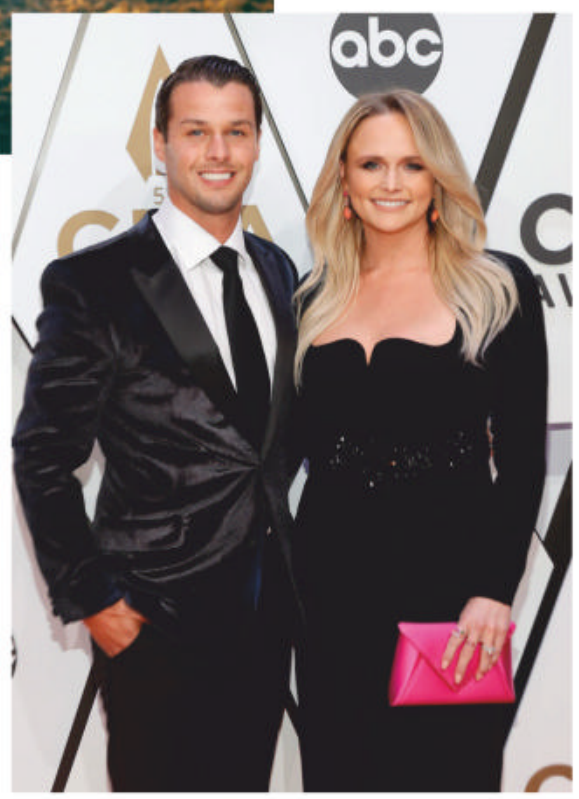
It's a nice way of showing, too, that country music belongs anywhere across the country. You're the perfect ambassador for that.

People ask me all the time, "Where's the most rednecks you've ever seen?" Which to me is an endearing term: I'm a red-dirt girl in all aspects of the word. But the most cowboy hats I've ever seen at a show was in California, and I'm from Texas. People who love the kind of stuff we love are all over the place. You just have to find each other.

You come out of the gate on *Palomino* with "Actin' Up," which is about a woman who is a little bit naughty — but fully in control. That's a theme of yours, and you're not afraid to sing about women who enjoy men, pleasure, sex, revenge.

She is a little bit naughty. I struggle because I have to sing "Kerosene," "Mama's Broken Heart," and "Little Red Wagon" forever, and what's that going to look like at 70? Those are songs that set up that whole side of my career. My grandma was a firecracker until her last breath, drinking Crown and Coke. If she can do it, I've just got to figure out a way to do it artistically. "Actin' Up" and "Geraldene" are both songs where there's fire, but I'm not burning down the house.

PREVIOUS SPREAD: ROBERT ASHCROFT



Above: Lambert with *The Marfa Tapes* contributors and fellow Texans Jon Randall (left) and Jack Ingram. Right: With husband Brendan McLoughlin at the CMAs in November.

The album is about characters, but there's a lot of you here, too: "I got my own kind of country, kind of funky," from "Actin' Up," sums you up.
That's it, that says it all. These songs are fun to write, even the sad ones. I was playing my mom and dad some songs, and my dad was like, "You seem jubilant about music right now." I'm glad he could see that on my face because there's been times where, about every August, I'd call my parents and say I'm quitting because I'm exhausted.

And what's more jubilant than having the B-52's sing on "Music City Queen"?
Exactly! I called my manager and said, "Could you, like, find out who manages the B-52's? I want them to sing on this." They said yes, they loved this song. But they did it on Zoom, with Luke and Jon. I had no idea if they knew who I was, or cared. It makes me joyful every time I hear it. Fred [Schneider] does that whole "She's a showboat, baby!" Pure joy.

And you cut one song that you didn't write, which is Mick Jagger's "Wandering Spirit." Has Mick heard it yet?
I don't know! I want him to hear it. When I cut "Easy From Now On" [first recorded by Emmylou Harris], I was so nervous. Same for when I did a John Prine song; I took it apart and did it my own way. Getting word that people hear your version and love it, that's all you ever want. If you're going to be ballsy enough to cover something, you better do it right.

The closer, "Carousel," makes you think of the pandemic, when the music stopped temporarily, but also when the show's over for good.
I read something about Robert Earl Keen the other day, and he was like, "I'm just going to stop." And how do you make that decision? How do you even know? How do you leave the faces and fans and relationships and guitars? Everything ends at some point and things are usually sad, but in this song it's a way to appreciate the other life you are gaining. The message of it is just so vast. We all cried. When you cry writing a song, you know you needed it.

You might be unsure how to sing songs like "Kerosene" when you are old, but this one feels like it could be sung forever.
I bet you it's the last song I'll ever sing when it is time.

Hopefully, in the wake of Covid, we've had some time to think about the overall well-being of artists, so they can grow old healthfully.
I hope so. I've gone onstage through some hard times physically or mentally or emotionally. I cried a lot onstage in 2015. This lady came up to me last year at a meet-and-greet and said, "I'm so glad to see you happy, because I saw you when you were sad." I said I was sorry I was sad, and she said, "It's OK, we forgave you. We were sad with you." But I think it's going to make us a little more empathetic.

Your new song for the Texas season of *Queer Eye*, "Y'all Means All," is all about empathy. You spoke recently about wanting to do more for the queer community, which is personal, too: Your brother, Luke, is gay.
I feel like I didn't realize I wasn't helping by not saying more. I want to be a part of a wave of change, and I'm learning every single day. "All Kinds of Kinds" (from 2011) was my first statement about being who you are and being accepted, and I never would shy away from it. I just wasn't being loud enough, I guess. I don't usually wave flags. I just say what I want to say in my music subtly and live my life. . . . I have always been firm on never letting politics into my professional life. There's enough shit noise all the time that I want to be someone's reprieve. But I do think if you have a platform like we do as musicians we should stand up for things we believe in. I am super-excited that I can be supportive of the LGBTQ community, and I hope I can be a voice that helps people to be accepting and open-minded about all kinds of things.

There's a line: "If you're torn between the Y's and X's, you ain't gotta play with the hand you're dealt." That feels very trans-accepting.
That is it! It is. That's the whole song. It's a way to do this in not a heavy way without any arguments online or listening to any hate. We just go, "This is fun, it feels good, and it tells the truth." That's all we can do as songwriters. I think we are becoming a lot more open as a genre, and I'm very happy to see it.

Have you felt that you're a little more vulnerable getting back to live shows?
With the Billy Bob's shows [in April 2021], I cried pretty much every night. I think it's OK to let tears fall while you're breathing out. I've noticed the crowds are a little more forgiving. I was playing the Minnesota Fair this last fall, and I fell onstage three times because it was pouring rain and very slippery. Everyone's like, "Yeah, it's fine."

It's a little weird for me to say this about your husband, but I think it's so funny how you post shirtless photos of Brendan where you . . .
Exploit him?

Well, yes.
I told him, "God gave you that amazing body. You're beautiful. Please share with the world. Don't be rude." He loves it, by the way. He's on board and thinks it's funny. He also works really hard at it! I'm like, "I work hard on my music, and I want people to hear it. You work hard on those abs. People need to see that, bud. I'm sorry." I tend to take myself way too seriously sometimes. But he's just a fun-loving, fun-hearted guy that is down for anything.

He's exposed you to a whole New York City life, too, which seems to suit you very well — part time, of course.
I got an apartment in SoHo and did New York life. I loved it. I thought it was good for my creative process, and it was good for me to just branch out. New York is such a magical place. Mind you, after about five days of the horns and stuff, I'm like, "OK, farm time, I need to go shovel some horseshit so I can find myself again." But I love both.

What did you watch or read in quarantine?
I read a lot during quarantine. One of my favorites was *Where the Crawdads Sing*. I also listened and still listen to a lot of podcasts. I loved *S-Town* and one called *Borderlands,* about Marfa, Texas. And, of course, we listen to a ton of music.

Who are you most excited by now in music, in country or beyond?
Lainey Wilson is great. She's a new female artist on the country scene, and I think she is so badass. I'm a big fan of Miley Cyrus. Her *Plastic Hearts* album is great and gets me pumped up. I've been diving into French music lately as well. It's soothing, and I kind of love making up my own story that I think some of the songs are about because I don't speak French.

In "Bathroom Sink," you sing, "I'm lookin' forward to the girl I wanna be." How far along on that journey have you come, to meeting that girl?
Well, dang, you went way back in the catalog, and a deep cut at that. I feel so blessed to be where I am today. I have learned so much about myself and about who I am as a person, and as an artist. But I think as I've gotten well into my thirties, I've really started to learn more about me the woman, not just the singer-songwriter. Bottom line, I guess, is that I'm still learning every day. I try to look at challenges as lessons now instead of just being upset because life gets hard at times. Life does life, and you just go with it on the roller coaster.

FROM TOP: SPENCER PEEPLES; JASON KEMPIN/GETTY IMAGES

THE *Lavish,* TOP-SECRET WORLD *of* PRIVATE GIGS

These days, everyone from Pitbull to Beyoncé will play for hire — for the right price

BY DAVID BROWNE

ILLUSTRATION BY LARS LEETARU

FOR JENNIFER LOPEZ, a November 2014 performance in Macau wasn't entirely out of the ordinary. She'd have to sing (here, to a backing track) for 40 minutes, accompanied by six to eight dancers; the contract stipulated she'd be furnished with "first-class" sound and lights. No recording or taping of the performance would be allowed. ★ But no tickets were sold, either. And the payday stood out, too: $1.25 million. To celebrate the birthday of a relative, a wealthy Chinese family flew Lopez to Asia to perform for them, tossing in $500,000 for airfare and hotel. The opulence didn't stop there; for the show, the family built a restaurant and a nightclub inside a Grand Hyatt ballroom, with a walkway connecting the two. And all for about 20 people in the audience, less than the number of crew members involved in working on the gig.

For more than 20 years, pop stars of all genres and generations, from Bob Dylan and the Eagles to Alicia Keys and John Legend, have been hired to play corporate events – big-paycheck performances for company employees or clients, often at theaters or arenas. Even during a pandemic, when live performances slowed down, that ecosystem has persisted. Last December, the blockchain-gaming platform Gala Games threw a "Galaverse" multinight private party in San Francisco, where its 500 guests gathered to hear Maroon 5, Alice Cooper, DJ Steve Aoki, a bit of Snoop Dogg, and a stripped-down set by two members of Arcade Fire. The venue included private rooms set up to look like a medieval tavern, a "Dungeons & Dragons" setup with a huge fake dragon, and a quasi Texas dance hall, while in another space, dancers were made up to look like zombies (to tie in with a *Walking Dead* game).

But alongside the world of corporate parties and retreats, a far more shadowy parallel world has been flourishing: the super-private gig. In that universe, stars in classic rock, hip-hop, and pop have been pulling in sizable fees for playing at weddings, birthday parties, anniversaries, and other personal-life milestones, all for those wealthy enough to afford it. The festivities allow performers to walk away with yacht-loads of cash and make one-percenter hosts feel like insiders and stars themselves. But along with the sizable paydays come sometimes dicey political issues that the artists have to navigate (or, sometimes, ignore).

In the early days of this industry, the only performers who would bite were oldies acts from the Fifties or Sixties. But today, the list of artists who've taken the money and played now reads like a pop chart. Fork over the right amount, as much as seven figures, and Beyoncé or Rod Stewart might play for your friends and family. The lineup includes veterans like John Mayer and newcomers like Charlie Puth (who was a surprise guest at a teenager's bat mitzvah in Boston). Sugar Ray are available, as is the semi-supergroup Ezra Ray Hart, composed of Sugar Ray's Mark McGrath, Tonic frontman Emerson Hart, and Better Than Ezra's Kevin Griffin, who will rock your house with a slew of Nineties hits. Pitbull, Nicki Minaj, and Flo Rida have played bar or bat mitzvahs.

In a sign of generational changes, old-school hip-hop acts like Coolio, Too Short, Vanilla Ice, and Naughty by Nature have also been hired for such up-close-and-personal shows. "We're seeing a lot of people who host a big-name artist in their mansions," says Jay Siegan, whose company, Jay Siegan Presents, has helped book major acts like Coldplay and Celine Dion for corporate events. "They do it discreetly and for 30 to 50 friends, and they'll have a million-dollar artist perform 45 minutes before they have a celebrity chef prepare a dinner. That's the kind of thing we've seen more and more of."

Sugar Ray recently partook in a birthday party for a wealthy client in San Diego, who rented out a club for a few dozen of his friends. "You go out, you play for the 40 people, and they're having drinks, having fun, going crazy," says McGrath, who says he earns roughly half of his annual income from such events. "Some of those, you have to work really hard; you're not getting the response you're used to getting in your hard-ticket shows, and it might hurt your ego a little bit. That's also a reason why you're getting paid three or four times what you normally get paid."

If none of this sounds familiar, there's a reason. In an atmosphere where poverty and the unequal distribution of wealth are part of the national conversation, a new degree of secrecy has kicked in. Few artists are willing to discuss these jobs, and the people who book the parties often sign agreements not to disclose any details about the performers, host, or locale. Meanwhile, the artists themselves aren't just cashing the checks but also grappling with who they play for and how much detail to reveal. "Some kind of opportunity was extended and we obliged," says one pop star of a recent event where he played. "The thing about private parties is, if you're not there, a lot of the details you don't really want to discuss too much. That's what allows it to maintain certain levels of exclusivity."

SUGAR RAY'S MCGRATH remembers the day he stumbled upon this new ecosystem. It was the late Nineties, the band's "Fly" was dominating the radio, and they were offered a gig playing for a tech company in the Bay Area. "They had all these lasers and six different rooms, with a DJ in one room, and about 30 disinterested people milling about," he recalls. "You've just kind of got to grind through it." But he also remembers the payday – "seven times what we'd ever seen before" – and how the show left a mark. "We said, 'This world is kind of fun,'" he says. "Back then, corporate parties or fairs were considered taboo – you were not cool if you did those things. We were *never* cool. So we didn't have anything to worry about."

That era, roughly 25 years ago, marked the dawn of the corporate gig for classic rock, when six- or seven-figure fees would entice Stewart, Billy Joel, or Crosby, Stills, and Nash to play a show for company employees at corporate behemoths like Pepsi and Bank of America. In 1998, thanks to a reported just-under-a-million-dollars paycheck, Bob and Jakob Dylan co-headlined a show (for the technology-hardware manufacturer Applied Materials) for the first and only time.

The dot-com boom of the early 2000s took the private-party circuit to a new level. Jesus Jones' Mike Edwards recalls the time his band, a decade after its heyday, was flown from the U.K. to the States to play a corporate conference – and all they had to do was play their lone hit, "Right Here, Right Now," at the

Senior writer DAVID BROWNE *chronicled a bizarre Seventies rock revue in the January issue.*

Party All the Time From top: Sugar Ray's Mark McGrath, a mainstay of the circuit since the late Nineties, when the band got an offer to perform for a Bay Area tech company; private-gig regular Lenny Kravitz at a Florida party that also featured lots of champagne and a set by T.I.; Jennifer Lopez at her controversial 2013 performance in Turkmenistan in Central Asia, for which her camp later apologized.

FROM TOP: SCOTT DUDELSON/GETTY IMAGES; ALEXANDER TAMARGO/GETTY IMAGES; IGOR SASIN/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

beginning of the event. "The host said, 'Welcome, everyone, hope you have a good time, and here's Jesus Jones,'" Edwards recalls. "We played 360 seconds, and the costs were minimal. . . . There was always the subtle undertone of 'You're dancing with the devil,' or somehow you're a corporate whore. But we got to play a song of ours that we quite liked and come home with a load of money. You think, 'Why *wouldn't* you?'"

The 2008 crash put the brakes on these fees, but according to talent bookers, as the economy began to improve over the past decade, those events picked up where they left off, and the super-private category – where the well-off are able to bring in a rock legend here, a pop icon there, to commemorate a special life moment – began to ramp up. Seal played aboard a yacht off the coast of Monaco for the members of a family who own a prominent airline. In 2018, Beyoncé was reportedly paid in the millions at the wedding of the children of two Indian billionaires. Around the same time, a one-percenter financier based in Utah constructed a full-on concert stage in his backyard to host former Bad Company singer Paul Rodgers. The host spent more than $1 million to fly in chefs from the O2 arena in London, and turned his multicar garage into an industrial kitchen. Due to the altitude, EMTs supplied with oxygen tanks were also on hand.

The Rodgers event was organized by Element Lifestyle, a private firm that charges its high-end clients a $48,000 yearly membership to help them with travel and vacation arrangements – and, increasingly, music events. In one of those deals, Ricky Martin was paid $500,000 to take the 10-minute drive from his Los Angeles home to sing at a wedding. A client from Iran, a fledgling singer himself, had a lifelong dream to duet with Andrea Bocelli, and for around $1 million, the crooner was flown in from Italy to join the host onstage in Los Angeles. Another client paid for Bocelli to make a surprise visit to his company's retreat in Italy. "In the pre-Covid world, there were clients who love music and love the live-music experience but don't necessarily love the thousands of people they're surrounded by," says Element Lifestyle founder Michael Albanese. "So this idea of creating an experience in their backyard or their home started to really take off."

According to Robert Norman, a CAA agent who helped pioneer this music ecosystem decades ago, another rich dude built "unique venues" for multiple party nights at his home. "We're not talking about putting up a tent," says Norman, who declines to mention the name of the host or the acts who played. "These were tiki lodges and a New Orleans–style blues house."

Not everyone accepts the offers. According to a source, a one-percenter was willing to pay $250,000 to ride motorcycles with Bruce Springsteen or hire him for a private concert. Springsteen supposedly declined. U2 are requested regularly, but according to Siegan, "U2 is one where I just have to tell my clients no." But those acts are increasingly in the music-world minority. "Some artists make their fees so high that people will say no to it," says Albanese. "But everyone has a price at the end of the day."

In 2018, during the prepandemic party gold rush, Bob McLynn of Crush Management, which handles Fall Out Boy, private-party regulars Train, and others, was taking his boat out for a spin off the Jersey shore when he came across dozens of boats parked in the water. Nearby was a carnival, complete with a Ferris wheel. "I yelled to one of the boats, 'Who's playing over there?'" McLynn says. "The guy says, 'Who!' I said, 'Who's playing over there?' And he's like, 'The Who!'"

It was actually Roger Daltrey, performing with his own band in a tent for the New Jersey real-estate mogul Steve Silverman. "If you had told me they were playing a guy's backyard over [*Cont. on 78*]

"YOU WEREN'T COOL IF YOU DID CORPORATE PARTIES. WE WERE *NEVER* COOL. SO WE DIDN'T HAVE ANYTHING TO WORRY ABOUT." —MARK MCGRATH

THE RESCUE

As America withdrew from Kabul and the Taliban moved in, two Afghanistan-born U.S. soldiers risked everything in the fight to get their families out alive

BY STEPHEN RODRICK

BELLY OF THE BEAST
Afghan refugees await evacuation aboard a cargo plane at Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul on Aug. 21, 2021.

SPC. FAZEL ROUFI SAW THE madness right away. It was 5 p.m. on Aug. 17 when the C-17 Globemaster carrying Roufi and his fellow soldiers of the 82nd Airborne Division dropped its ramp at Kabul's Hamid Karzai International Airport. The soldiers were told to lock and load their weapons before descending onto a tarmac blanketed with the detritus of refugees: left-behind clothing and empty water bottles swirling in the wind.

Everyone was on a razor's edge, no one more than Roufi. Kabul was his hometown. He had not eaten since he left his Fort Bragg home in Fayetteville, North Carolina, and choked back vomit as he walked onto the tarmac. He was frightened, but the fear wasn't for himself. He squinted into the sun and saw the roads adjacent to the airport where he used to ride his bicycle as a boy on his way to English lessons. Those streets were now choked with thousands of would-be refugees, their meager possessions strapped to their backs, mothers grasping the hands of screaming and frightened children. They had arrived at the airport with papers signifying varying degrees of American affiliation; letters of recommendations from long-gone embassy personnel; and cellphone testimonials from now-retired Army officers who they translated for during the forever war.

Somewhere beyond the gates were Roufi's mom and dad, his six sisters and four brothers, their spouses, and a handful of nephews and nieces, 24 in total. They desperately wanted out of Afghanistan and were counting on him. He wondered if they were nearby, jammed into cars on a side street or back home with the shades drawn.

The Afghan government had fallen 48 hours earlier, and the Taliban had entered Kabul. A madness descended over the city. There was no law and order. At the airport, the Taliban shot at U.S. Marines. They returned fire and killed two of the insurgents. Meanwhile, hundreds of Afghans broke through airport fences and chased a departing C-17 down the runway, some of them plummeting to their deaths from the wheel well of the plane.

Back in Washington, President Biden insisted this was not another Saigon. The right-wingers squealed that America was in disgrace, and the K Street crowd gathered for coffee and pastries at the Willard Hotel, raking in retainers from international conglomerates trying to get their assets out of the country.

Roufi knew it was a mad world. He had watched for two decades as billions of dollars and 176,000 dead resulted in Afghanistan replacing the Taliban with the Taliban. He knew the United States had followed the British Empire and the Soviet Union into the graveyard of Afghanistan. But Roufi wasn't concerned with affairs of state. He already knew that the fate of Afghan families could be decided by a piece of paper or the mood of a scared young soldier.

Senior writer STEPHEN RODRICK *wrote about the John Deere and Kellogg's strikes for RollingStone.com.*

He wasn't the only one. Arriving at Hamid Karzai International Airport on the same day was 1st Lt. Marshall Shekib, another 82nd Airborne member and Kabul native with family in danger. Their paths would cross in three days, but right now they both fought alone.

Earlier that day, Roufi's family had tried to make it to the airport gates, but the crush of people had reached dystopian levels. Shots rang out, the Taliban brandished whips, and mothers tossed their babies to Marines in hopes of getting them out of the country.

Roufi had last talked to his mom and dad on the phone 12 hours earlier, during a refueling stop in Germany. He could tell they were in trouble. His family had watched an Afghan policeman shoot a man trying to climb a fence and witnessed a woman run over by a truck. They were scared, and he could sense in the voice of Abdul, Roufi's proud father, that he and the family were losing hope.

Through the fuzzy connection, Roufi heard women screaming and men shouting, the sound of bedlam. Then he recognized the voice of his 18-year-old sister, Fatima, the baby of the family. Fatima wanted to be a journalist and possessed a composure beyond her years. But right now her voice was mad with fear.

"Fazel, the Taliban are coming over to us. The Taliban are going to kill us. Fazel!"

And then the line went dead. For the next 12 hours, Roufi feared his family was dead. And he feared it was his fault. After all, he was the one who came to the United States and became an American soldier.

ROUFI NEVER THOUGHT he would go home again. That was all right with him. There were things he missed about Kabul; mostly his brothers and sisters crowded in the four-level house in the Khair Khana district, a modern section of Kabul that suggested all of the city's hope and possibilities. He longed for his mother's *qabili palau,* a meat-and-rice dish, and sharing a conspiratorial look with his dad when the old man slipped away to throw dice with his police buddies.

He was six years old when the twin towers fell, and the Americans arrived in Kabul. He remembered his mother and aunts rejoicing at their new freedoms after the Taliban were chased back into the caves and hills. His big brown eyes lit up when coalition troops walked the streets dispersing chocolates and soccer balls. Some suspicious Afghans declined the goodies, claiming the candy was poison and the balls somehow included listening devices. Roufi didn't care, he and his friends just wanted to play like Cristiano Ronaldo, whose poster hung on his bedroom wall.

But there was much he didn't miss. As a kid, he took up kickboxing, eventually becoming a junior national champion, so he could protect himself from thieves and gangs on his long walk to school. Afghanistan was a country where you were always on guard. The country had been run by communists,

DESPERATE TIMES
Right: Marines guard a checkpoint at Hamid Karzai International Airport on Aug. 21, 2021. Within days of the Taliban takeover of Kabul, the airport had descended into chaos, as hopeful refugees crushed its gates.

HOMECOMING
Below: Army Spc. Fazel Roufi grew up in Kabul but decamped to the U.S. on a special visa after high school, eventually becoming a citizen. As Kabul fell, he hatched a plan to get 24 of his family members out.

PREVIOUS SPREAD: STAFF SGT. BRANDON CRIBELAR/U.S. AIR FORCE. THIS PAGE: LT. COL. BRETT LEA/82ND AIRBORNE DIVISION

STAFF SGT. VICTOR MANCILLA/U.S. MARINE CORPS

THE CROWD SURGED TOWARD THE CONCERTINA WIRE. AN OLD WOMAN WAS GASPING FOR AIR AT THE BOTTOM OF THE SCRUM. ROUFI SHOUTED AT HER, "GRAB MY LEG AND DON'T LET GO."

theocrats, and now kleptocrats. He knew the only Afghan certainty was that the political chairs would be rearranged, and some Afghans would pay with their lives.

You were always being watched. A friendly high-five with a Yankee soldier might be filed away and used against you during the next, inevitable regime transformation.

"Things will change, and then they will change again," his father told him. "You have to be always careful."

In between, there was violence. One of Roufi's English-class requirements was to daily translate a news article from his native Pashto to English. Roufi cheated by translating the same car-bomb story every day, just changing the neighborhood or town. A bomb was always going off somewhere in Roufi's world.

He graduated from high school in 2011. Roufi's English was good and he was smart, so it was not hard for him to get a commission in the Afghan army. He was made a captain after a year at military academy. But Roufi had dreams other than to be sent to a faraway province to fight the Taliban. He applied for a student visa designed for Afghan officers to continue their education in the United States.

The agreement was that he would study for two years and come back and serve his country. He ended up in San Antonio and almost immediately met a kind and selfless girl named Vanessa at a crowded BBQ joint. She taught him about Mexican food and the seemingly indecipherable culture of the Lone Star State. They fell in love and married within six months. Roufi's father, Abdul, went to his Afghan commander and explained that if Roufi came home he would not be eligible to return to the U.S. and his bride for 10 years. Abdul's commander smiled and said anyone who could get out of Afghanistan had his blessing.

Roufi took some classes and worked security. But he felt an obligation to his new country. He wanted to thank America for welcoming him, and the best way he knew was to enlist in the United States Army. The Army welcomed him, but there was a catch. Roufi had always wanted to be an intelligence officer, but since he was not yet a citizen, his career path was either the infantry or as a mechanic – nothing that might provide him with sensitive information.

After basic training, he scored well on his placement tests and received bonus points on his Army profile for speaking Pashto and Dari, Afghanistan's two primary languages. He was also athletic and in terrific condition. He would still be a mechanic, but it would be with the 82nd Airborne Division, elite paratroopers whose reputation stretched from Normandy to Ramallah.

Vanessa and Roufi moved to Fort Bragg, the 82nd's home, settled into a two-level ranch house, and decorated it with pictures of their family. Roufi got his "wings" after completing jump school, and he slipped into a routine of repairing the unit's Humvees and other military vehicles. Sometimes, he was a little bored. He had come here to do great things, and now he was doing oil changes for a living.

Covid hit and Roufi had more time to think. He didn't want to be a career soldier, he wanted to move to Miami and maybe open a restaurant. (This would be a battle with Vanessa since she wanted to move home to Texas.) His dreams were sancti-

fied when he became an American citizen in the summer of 2020. Now, he reasoned, nothing was impossible. He just had another two years left on his enlistment.

Then last spring, the calls and texts started coming in from his family. The Americans were leaving. There was happy talk that the Afghan government would be able to hang on to at least Kabul for years.

And then the happy talk changed: Maybe they could hold Kabul for a year or six months. By July, the Taliban were taking long-held government strongholds. Roufi told his family to be calm, he would check on their visa applications – some had been languishing for a decade. Roufi began hearing rumors that the 82nd Airborne might deploy to Kabul to help extricate American "friendlies" and their families. He thought this might mean his family; they had been pro-American and had a son in the American Army. Still, he didn't know what he could do for them. He was just a mechanic.

The summer wore on, and the Afghan government kept losing territory. Roufi reasoned the Afghan generals and their troops would make a stand in Kabul, if not for the country then to save the lavish lifestyle they'd built on whatever they could skim from the Americans in schemes that ranged from pocketing the salaries of ghost soldiers to banking the proceeds from nonexistent body armor.

"The government won't fall," Roufi told Abdul, his father, on a WhatsApp call. "Rich people have too much to lose."

He was wrong. The generals cut deals with the Taliban and fled for Tajikistan or Pakistan, wherever they had stashed their money and their girlfriends. Soon, the city was defenseless. Shop owners ripped down hair-salon posters advertising Western cuts. On the afternoon of Aug. 15, the president fled to Tajikistan on a helicopter without telling his senior staff. Kabul was up for grabs.

His sisters' professional lives – the older two were a dentist and a surgeon – ended that day. And if the Taliban or ISIS-K terrorists who had infiltrated Afghanistan during the chaos learned the sisters had a brother serving in the U.S. Army, Roufi's whole family might be killed. He told his family to go to the airport. From Fort Bragg, he was able to FaceTime at the gate with an 82nd paratrooper already on the ground.

"My family is there; can you help them?" yelled Roufi into a bad FaceTime connection.

"Bro, it's insane here," said the soldier. "I can't do anything."

Roufi had one card left to play. The 82nd has an open-door policy in which a soldier can skip the chain of command in case of an emergency. He talked to his division chaplain, and later that afternoon he was escorted to the offices of Maj. Gen. Christopher Donahue, a gruff but charismatic Army man. Donahue was driving back from Capitol Hill to the Pentagon on 9/11 when a jet crashed into the complex and killed 184 of his colleagues. He'd been fighting in the war without end for two decades and had deployed 17 times to Iraq, Afghanistan, North Africa, and Syria. He had killed the Taliban and the Taliban had killed his friends. Now 51, Donahue was preparing to lead his soldiers back to Kabul to a war he'd been told was over.

SHEKIB ASKED HIS SISTER TO SEND A PHOTO OF WHAT SHE WAS WEARING TO SPOT HER IN THE CROWD. "DON'T CHANGE YOUR CLOTHES," HE TOLD HER. "THIS IS THE ONLY WAY I CAN FIND YOU."

Spc. Roufi was escorted into Donahue's office amid a tornado of majors and colonels with maps and briefing books. Roufi knew he needed to project confidence that he could be an asset, so he stood ramrod straight and saluted the general.

Donahue was called by some "the Flatliner" because his temperament never changed no matter how dicey the situation. He looked up at Roufi with unreadable eyes.

"What can I do for you, soldier?"

Roufi spoke up.

"My whole family is in Kabul. I need to help them. I don't want them to die."

Donahue asked Roufi if he spoke Pashto and Dari well enough to translate for him and his staff.

"General, I can."

Donahue looked back at Roufi for a long moment.

"You're my guy. We will get your family out."

Roufi summoned up the last of his courage.

"Do you mean it?"

Donahue stared back at the specialist.

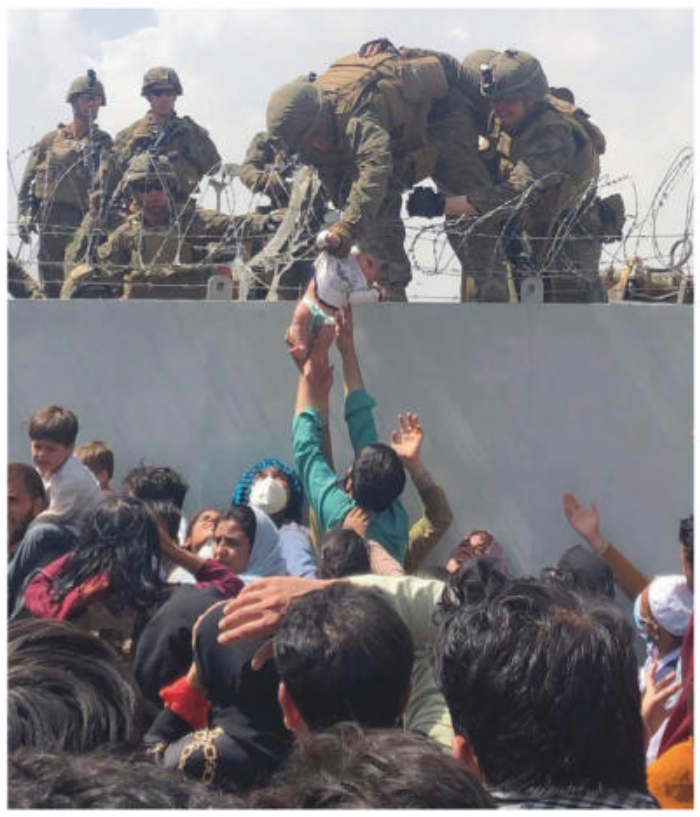
"Go pack your gear. We're leaving in two hours."

FIRST LT. MARSHALL Shekib had taken a different approach than Roufi. He didn't tell his family he was in Kabul until he was on the ground. His reluctance to leverage his position to save his family was wrapped up in an almost pathological sense of duty to his new country. He had served 12 years in the Army, rising from grunt to officer. He would tell anyone who would listen that the United States had not invaded Afghanistan but liberated the country.

Like Roufi, the granite-jawed Shekib had been raised in Kabul. He grew up in a Westernized family, complete with HBO and a coveted box full of Jean-Claude Van Damme VCR tapes. After graduating from high school, Shekib was teaching English to Afghan children when an American soldier told him that he could triple his salary if he came to

FIGHTING TO BE FREE
Left: Army 1st Lt. Marshall Shekib, a Kabul native, was granted a U.S. visa after translating for American soldiers while in high school. Right: Afghans trying to flee climbed onto departing planes.

A LIVING HELL
Below left: A Marine lifts an infant to safety at an evacuation checkpoint. Below right: A child bloodied by Taliban fighters, who used gunfire and the butts of their weapons to control the airport crowds.



FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: WAKIL KOHSAR/AFP/GETTY IMAGES; COURTESY OF OMAR HAIDIRI/AFP/GETTY IMAGES; MARCUS YAM/"LOS ANGELES TIMES"/GETTY IMAGES

Camp Dynamite and translated in Kabul for Americans on patrol.

For the next three years, Shekib translated at night and went to college during the day. He moved into the camp and varied his routes to the university in case he was followed. Eventually, Shekib was granted a visa for himself, his wife, and his infant son to immigrate to America, based on his years of service. Like Roufi, Shekib wanted to give something back to his new country. He enlisted in the Army within a year of arriving in the United States. He was speed-rushed through a translator program and was deployed in 2010 to the northern province of Faryab, near the Turkmenistan border, where the Afghan government had only the illusion of control.

Following protocol, Shekib was ordered to brief his commanding officer on how he could be most useful to his new unit. Some of the Afghan American translators had special privileges, including being given posher tents near command. Shekib did not want that. He told his commanding officer he could best help not by representing himself as a pampered translator, but by standing in the background of meetings between Afghan locals and his commanding officer as an ordinary soldier and listening to the official translation. Afterward, he would tell his boss if the translators left out any details or if they expressed anti-American sentiments in their side conversations. Shekib said this would only work if the rest of the unit's soldiers thought he was just another grunt who bunked in a squad tent.

Shekib's colonel liked the idea and told him to report to the staff sergeant, who would give him a more Americanized name tag to wear on patrol. The sergeant sized up Shekib and told him that he looked like a guy in the unit named Sanchez.

"Go get one of his name tags."

To pull off the ruse, Shekib left his sunglasses on while on patrol, and his fellow soldiers were told he was Hispanic and from outside Los Angeles. The scheme worked well for six or seven months. Then, the colonel and Shekib approached a border tower outside a Faryab village made up of a few dozen mud huts. It was a standard meet-and-greet with local officials. What Shekib didn't realize was that the actual Afghan border unit had been kidnapped and the Taliban were wearing their uniforms. While his colonel was talking to the head of the unit, Shekib stood within listening distance of a Taliban soldier. One of them held a Russian-made PKM machine gun. They started whispering in Pashto.

"Take the PKM up in the tower," one said, "and shoot the officer and his Humvee."

Shekib knew what he heard and waited until one of the Taliban stepped toward the tower. He screamed at the two soldiers in Pashto.

"Drop your weapons. Now."

His colonel recognized the situation and shouted at the rest of his men.

"Do exactly what Sanchez says."

The Taliban were disarmed, and everyone was safe.

During his whole time in Afghanistan, Shekib didn't dare reach out to his family in Kabul, just 400 miles away. He returned to the United States and spent the next decade working his way up the ranks, eventually going to Officer Candidate School. He was commissioned a lieutenant and became an intelligence officer in 2019.

In August, he got his orders to fly out to Kabul with the division's First Brigade. He drove home, told his wife and son that he was being deployed and that he could be gone for six months. He pet his German shepherd and then drove back to the base for his flight. He didn't text his sister in Kabul, reasoning that he didn't want to get her hopes up in case the mission went sideways.

After arriving at HKIA, he lost himself in trying to get translators squared away, and it was not until his second day on the ground that he got a text via WhatsApp from his sister, who lived less than three miles away.

"Things are bad here. People are flying out, leaving the country."

Shekib texted her back.

"I'm here."

"Where's here?"

"The airport."

At first, she didn't believe him.

IF ROUFI AND SHEKIB represented the human drama of the Kabul evacuation at the micro level, Donahue saw the larger picture that was no less fucked up. He was briefed repeatedly on the 24-hour journey from Fort Bragg to Kabul. The Taliban were beating the crowd outside the airport. There had been stampedes that had killed an unknown number of Afghans. People were dying of heart attacks and dehydration. A soldier offered a water bottle to an old man, and a dozen or so refugees swarmed the man in the hope of getting a sip.

The only solution was something that would have been unimaginable just days before: cooperate with the Taliban. The two-star Donahue was the deputy commander of American troops under Navy Adm. Peter Vasley, a longtime colleague whose leadership skills meshed with his own. This was fortuitous. Vasley left Donahue in charge of extraction of all forces from the airport. Donahue had years of experience in fighting the Taliban, but more recently had found "common interests," as the Americans like to call it, specifically a shared enemy, ISIS-K, a regional offshoot of the terrorist organization as sadistically violent as the original model.

Before coming to the 82nd, Donahue had served as the commander of the Special Operations Joint Task Force-Afghanistan in support of Operation Freedom's Sentinel, the successor to Operation Enduring Freedom, America's original Afghan mission. According to a senior military official, Donahue and American forces entered into a realpolitik relationship with the Taliban in 2019, and provided air support as they wiped out ISIS-K forces in Tora Bora, Osama

MASS EXODUS
Left: The last of the 82nd Airborne Division's paratroopers board an Air Force cargo plane to complete the withdrawal from Afghanistan on Aug. 31, 2021. When Shekib got home, his wife asked what it had been like. He said, "It's not the Afghanistan we knew."

LAST MAN STANDING
Below: Maj. Gen. Chris Donahue, commander of the 82nd Airborne, boards a C-17 cargo plane as the final U.S. service member to depart Afghanistan. Earlier, in Fort Bragg, Donahue had promised Roufi, "We will get your family out."

MASTER SGT. ALEXANDER BURNETT/U.S. ARMY, 2

bin Laden's old hiding place. Donahue knew all the Taliban players.

Donahue arrived on the same flight as Roufi, and after a quick meeting with Vasley, commandeered a Jeep and set out for a reconnaissance of the airport with a few soldiers.

Almost immediately, they spotted a half-dozen Taliban with rifles sweeping out the main terminal. Donahue swore to himself.

"Get them out of there."

Donahue made his way to the roof of the terminal. According to a witness, he found eight Taliban snipers with their rifles trained on the gates where Marines and despairing Afghans were gathering again at full swell. The American and Taliban stared at one another for a moment. Donahue spoke first in English and then through his translator.

"Get the hell off the roof. You're done, get out."

The Taliban descended the stairs, and Donahue called for two squads to take their place.

Donahue understood that the Americans and Taliban were at a surreal crossroads. The Taliban had won the war, but the Americans still had the firepower to destroy their Kabul forces and level the country. He ordered a jet fighter to fly over the Taliban's airport positions fast and low. That got the Taliban's attention. He then met with the leader of the Taliban at the airport, a member of the group's elite Red Unit, and told him he wanted to meet with the Taliban's Kabul military commander.

Four hours later, Donahue and his staff sat down in a nondescript conference room at the airport with Qari Hamdullah Mohlis, the Taliban's longtime military strategist. (Mohlis had reached a level of international fame two days earlier when he was the first Taliban leader to enter the presidential palace.) The room was full of Taliban and American soldiers who had done good and terrible things for their sides, and now eyed one another warily. Donahue and Mohlis had been hunting each other for years, and there was a grudging respect, according to a senior military officer in the meeting.

"Let's just cut to the chase," said Donahue, according to eyewitness accounts. "You need us more than we need you."

Mohlis didn't say much, letting Donahue talk himself out. Donahue then pulled out a map.

"Check it out, here's where all your positions are. There's a B-52 and there's a B-1 over top. I'm telling you right now what they're gonna do," Donahue said. "They have every single one of your positions lined in. And if you shoot at us, we will kill every one of your checkpoints. And if you think I'm screwing around, you know me, and I know you. Tempt us."

No one was quite sure if this was a legit threat or First World machismo – the United States had the firepower to do what Donahue said, but what would a departing America do with a bombed-out Kabul and thousands of casualties on their hands? At the moment, American troops were turtled in at the airport. Maybe it was bullshit, but the Taliban didn't know for sure. Donahue and Mohlis' staff worked out some rough parameters. The Taliban would completely exit the airport and set up a checkpoint 50 to 100 yards from the airport's three entrances: the North, South, and Abbey gates. To try to restore some order, Marine and Army soldiers would communicate directly with their Taliban counterparts at the gates with translators like Roufi and Shekib facilitating the talks.

This isn't to say there was trust. Donahue and his staff knew the Taliban were ruthless killers. Still, both sides agreed that thousands of Afghans arriving at the gates was a huge problem and pledged to work out a system in which refugees would arrive in groups, not as individuals. American soldiers would deliver to the Taliban a list of State Department-approved refugees arriving on buses. The Taliban would check the list and then let the group through. The meeting broke up, and both sides expressed hope of bringing a modicum of order to the situation.

It seemed like a good plan.

SPC. ROUFI WASN'T at the meeting. The general had told him to find his family and bring them into the airport. But that was an onerous task. The entire clan had retreated back to their home after the Taliban had started moving in their direction.

Roufi's father was ready to give up. It wasn't only the Taliban that 63-year-old Abdul Roufi dreaded – he feared losing his family. There was no way, Abdul reasoned, the Americans would let all of them into their country. Maybe he and his wife and his daughters could get out, but that would splinter their family and destroy his wife, Diljan, a tiny but power-

A WHOLE NEW LIFE Roufi with his father, Abdul, and mother, Diljan. Abdul still watches the Afghan news on satellite TV and sometimes questions the decision to leave Afghanistan. But in America, he says of his family, "we are all safe and together."

ful force in the family. Besides, who would he be in America?

"What will I do there?" Abdul asked Diljan. "I'm old and don't speak the language. I'll have nothing."

But then Abdul looked at his daughters, so successful and smart. They had no future, and to Abdul, that meant he had no future there, either. When Roufi reached one of his brothers and told them to come to the airport's South Gate, Abdul knew it was the right thing to do. They quickly grabbed their small "go" bags and piled into three cars, leaving a house and an entire life behind.

The drive to the airport usually took 20 minutes. This time, it took an hour. Ahmed, one of Roufi's older brothers, drove the lead car in the caravan. They passed their fellow Afghans, some trudging toward the airport, others straggling back home, ghosts covered in dust and blood.

The gates at the airport were known by different names to locals, so Roufi told his brother to head toward the customs building on Hotkhel Street. Roufi jumped on top of a concrete barrier and looked for his family. It was crucial that the Taliban not know that the Roufi family were being moved through the gate by a brother and son who now wore the American uniform. The Taliban could bar them from leaving, and from there was an endless parade of grim possibilities. The Taliban had been known to seize the houses of American sympathizers, kill the patriarch, and pair the women off with Taliban soldiers looking for brides. Roufi told his brother Ahmed to signal when he saw him, but not to betray any emotion that they were related.

When Roufi finally spotted his brother, his heart nearly exploded. It had been six long years since he had seen his family. But he just nodded and looked away. His family bunched together to one side. Roufi and another translator walked the few remaining steps to the gate. Roufi wore a uniform without rank – better to confuse enemy snipers as to who were the senior officers. Roufi had never been in combat but put on his best thousand-yard stare and pointed at his family. He gestured to the Taliban.

"Let them through."

The Taliban soldier asked a question.

"How many of them?"

On the flight over, Roufi promised himself he wouldn't get greedy; he would just bring in his mother and father and his sisters, the men would have to make their own way. But then he saw two things: the hellish conditions in Kabul and the well-heeled Afghan apparatchiks already in the terminal with their extended families. He saw the faces of the little nephews and nieces he had never met. How could he save some and condemn others to misery? He embraced his newly acquired American exceptionalism.

"Bring all of them through."

Roufi's family began to file through the gate two by two. A dead-tired Marine erupted with anger when he realized that Roufi was bringing in a small army of Afghans. He looked at Roufi, with his beard, and probably wondered if he was special ops or CIA. He paused for a minute and then learned Roufi's rank – he was just another soldier.

"No fucking way. You can't bring that many people in."

Usually, Roufi would have made nice. This time he didn't. "We have an order," he said. "This is my family, and they're in danger."

The Marine still resisted. He'd been on the gate for hours and seen Afghans claw and scratch to move one yard closer to the gate. Now, he was asked to let in 24 people who had emerged out of nowhere. He wasn't backing down.

"You can't do this."

At this point, having friends in high places changed the direction of 24 lives. A special-forces officer that Donahue had sent along in case of trouble spoke up.

ROUFI'S FAMILY LOOKED FRIGHTENED. NONE HAD BEEN ON AN AIRPLANE BEFORE. HIS MOTHER WAS CALMER THAN THE REST: "IF WE CRASH, IT WILL BE OUR WAY TO FREEDOM."

"You'll let them through, per General Donahue's orders."

And just like that, the Roufi family was through the gate. Neither Roufi nor his family showed any emotion until they had moved out of sight of the Taliban. His mother began to cry, but not Roufi. For the next six hours, he managed his family through the security checkpoints and bureaucracy of a mass exodus. At 2 a.m., the family joined a line and began walking toward a C-17 bound for Qatar. He noticed that his mother, his sisters, and their children looked frightened. He didn't understand why until one of them explained it to him. None of them had ever been on an airplane before. His mother seemed calmer than the rest.

"If we crash, it will be our way to freedom," she said.

Roufi stayed with his family until the plane was ready. He then watched the aircraft take off and disappear into the night. It was then that he finally cried. [*Cont. on 78*]

PHOTOGRAPH BY JEREMY M. LANGE | 67

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Reviews

Music

KOFFEE'S REGGAE REVIVAL

The rising Jamaican artist combines classic and new sounds on a great album

By MANKAPRR CONTEH

Koffee

Gifted

COLUMBIA

★★★★☆

KOFFEE HAS only had about a dozen of her songs widely available to stream until now, but the 22-year-old Jamaican artist is already proving she can reinvigorate reggae and dancehall for a pop audience. Her joyous 2018 smash "Toast" earned her spots on two of Barack Obama's coveted playlists, and in 2019 she became the first woman to win the Grammy for Best Reggae Album. Along the way, she's collaborated with rapper Gunna and John Legend, and this year she'll open the Latin American leg of Harry Styles' world tour. Now, she's delivering on the promise of "Toast" with *Gifted,* her excellent debut full-length.

On *Gifted,* Koffee combines traditional reggae with ➔

ILLUSTRATION BY
Dani Pendergast

KOFFEE

modern flourishes and hip-hop sensibilities, reminding us that rap's roots are richly intertwined with Jamaican music. While a song like "Lonely" could make the purest purist smile, "Defend" breaks out dusty boom-bap production, and "Shine" sets sunny guitars over tittering hi-hats and strong 808s. The album's musical backdrops range from breezy to absorbing, but it's Koffee's performances that are consistently bewitching. She skips between honeyed, heartfelt trills and mind-bogglingly meticulous flows, intricate and acrobatic. Even on the gentle "Lonely," Koffee can't help but break into dexterous bars about her vision, style, and inspirations for a fiery denouement.

"Lonely" is one of a handful of tracks here that could be classified as a love song, something that, so far, has mostly been absent from her catalog. Koffee usually puts pen to paper to empower and give thanks, but the girl proves herself to be a compelling romantic, too. When she coaxes and compliments her "darling" (her pet name of choice; she doesn't employ any gendered pronouns) on "Lonely," her game is so sweet and soft it almost feels platonic: "I hope your day's fine – we should spend the day now." She's bolder on the standout "Run Away," where her flashy flexes amount to pleas for affection: "I just wanna love somebody," she admits.

More than anything, though, *Gifted* is a portrait of a brilliant young artist keenly aware of the miracles that lift her up: a loving mother, a benevolent maker, a tight community, and an impeccable sense of rhythm and rhyme. "Pull Up," a winning meetup with the producer and Afroswing maven JAE5, is one of the album's liveliest celebrations of life and love, elevated by a swirling sax line that winds around Koffee's jubilant closing hook.

You can picture her bright, braced smile when she coos about the simple pleasure of being outside on album opener "x10," and again on "West Indies," when she reminds her managers that even if she's a prodigy, she also wants to party like any other kid. Even when Koffee engages with hardship in her hometown – she name-checks crime, inflation, and police brutality – she does so with brevity and optimism. Koffee is not blind to misfortune. She's looking up in spite of it.

RHCP'S HIGH-POWER HOMECOMING

The Chili Peppers reunite with guitarist John Frusciante and create one of their best LPs in years By BRITTANY SPANOS

Red Hot Chili Peppers
Unlimited Love
Warner Bros.
★★★★☆

WHEN WE think of the Red Hot Chili Peppers at their best – making rock that was both breezily Californian and exceedingly funky – guitarist John Frusciante has always been the heartbeat of that sound. Of course, Frusciante's experience with the band has been tempestuous. He's quit twice, most recently parting ways with the group after the tour for their massive double album *Stadium Arcadium* in 2009.

But in 2019, fans of the Chili Peppers were pleasantly shocked by news of Frusciante's return.

Along with Frusciante, they've also reunited with Rick Rubin, who produced every RHCP album from 1992's *Blood Sugar Sex Magik* to 2011's *I'm With You,* their first with Frusciante's replacement, Josh Klinghoffer. The result is vintage RHCP: a jammy, melodic effort that blends the wavy reflections of their 1999 triumph, *Californication,* with the expansive rock of *Stadium Aracadium*.

On lead single "Black Summer," Frusciante vamps and singer Anthony Kiedis serves up a wacky little Irish pirate accent. The band tends to get a lot of flak for Kiedis' lyrics, a sometimes confounding stream of consciousness that would leave James Joyce scratching his head. But for fans, this is often what makes them so delightful, and if you dig beneath the sometimes-muddled surface, there is often a deeper message. Some of the songs here, including "Black Summer," address an underlying climate and Earth anxiety. On "The Great Apes," a kind of booming arena-rock singalong, Kiedis begs, "I just want the great apes to be free."

Much of the album feels like a tour of the band's greatest tropes. Take the funky "Aquatic Mouth Dance," which feels like an ode to their funk-rap past, as Flea slaps the bass beneath Kiedis spitting a mix of random references and sometimes earnest yearning. Moving the song forward is a flush of horns, a surprising and gorgeous addition to many of the tracks on the album.

Cuts like the highlight "White Braids & Pillow Chair," "It's Only Natural," "She's a Lover," and "Veronica" are often silly love songs ("I could spend my nights with you/This pussywillow," Kiedis offers), but they're genuinely tender, evoking the oceanic feelings of the more restrained moments of Seventies FM rock on *Californication* and 2002's *By the Way*.

More than anything, this record feels like a coming home. There's a certain magic that happens with these four musicians, and Frusciante's absence always leaves a piece of the puzzle missing. Thankfully, he always finds his way back.

FROM TOP: SANDY KIM; COURTESY OF REMA

BREAKING

Rema's Smooth Afrorave Sunshine

YOU'VE HEARD of Afrobeat, and Afrobeats — now it's time to get psyched for Afrorave, the enticing genre name that rising Nigerian star Rema has given to the resplendently smooth sound radiating throughout his debut, *Rave & Roses*. Rema has already done big streaming numbers for songs like "Dumebi" and the hypnotic "Soundgasm," which is on the LP. On *Rave & Roses,* his gracious high register splashes over tracks like "Runaway," a lush lover's plea. But there are moodier moments, too, like "Addicted," with its brooding Eighties synths. The mix of sunshine and a little shade makes for a great listen. **JON DOLAN**

★★★★★ Classic | ★★★★ Excellent | ★★★ Good | ★★ Fair | ★ Poor RATINGS ARE SUPERVISED BY THE EDITORS OF ROLLING STONE.

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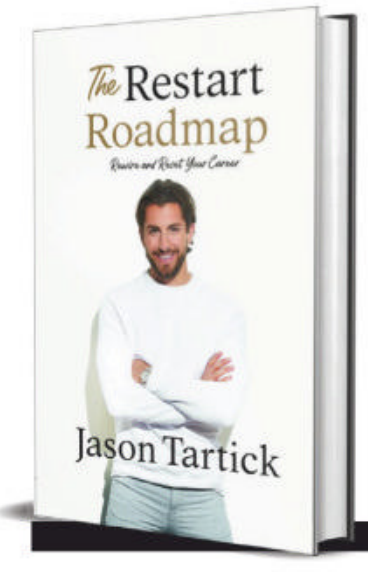

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Kim and Min-Ho navigate a doomed love.

PLAYING AN UNWINNABLE GAME

'Pachinko' is a sweeping epic mining the generational trauma and identity struggles of Koreans raised under Japanese rule

Pachinko

NETWORK	Apple TV+
AIR DATE	Fridays
STARRING	Minha Kim Youn Yuh-jung Jin Ha

★★★★½

ALAN SEPINWALL

APPLE+'S ADAPTATION of Min Jin Lee's historical-fiction epic *Pachinko* bounces back and forth between several phases of its heroine Sunja's life: growing up in Korea under the yoke of Japanese rule, where she's played as a girl in the 1920s by Yu-na Jeon and as a young woman in the 1930s by Minha Kim; then her late-1980s retirement in Japan (where she's played by Youn Yuh-jung), reflecting back on her life's many triumphs, tragedies, and compromises. In one scene in 1989, Sunja and her banker grandson Solomon (Jin Ha) are in the home of a fellow Korean expat, who surprises her guests by serving them Korean rice. Solomon can't tell the difference from the kind he grew up eating in Osaka, Japan, but Sunja explains that rice grown in Korea is nuttier and a bit sweeter, albeit harder to chew on. It's too subtle a distinction for Solomon to grasp, but it means everything to his grandmother.

The pleasures and depths of *Pachinko,* adapted by Soo Hugh and directed by Kogonada and Justin Chon, are so tactile that by the time you reach the end of this magnificent first season's eighth episode, you will feel as if you can taste the sweet nuttiness that fills the elder Sunja with so much unexpected joy.

Japan's occupation of Korea, which lasted from 1910 through the end of World War II, hasn't been chronicled much in Western art. But even if this were well-trod territory, *Pachinko* covers the subject with such artistry and grace that it would still feel special. It's a family saga that combines the denseness of prose fiction with the specific advantages of television, like the ability to have actors bring characters from the page to flesh-and-blood life. All three Sunjas are wonderful, whether *Minari* Oscar winner (and Korean screen legend) Yuh-jung, or newcomers Jeon and Kim. Their mannerisms are perfectly in sync, so that when one Sunja smiles, or cries, it instantly conjures memories of the others doing the same.

There are fewer opportunities for the Kim version to smile, as she exists in the most emotionally and politically challenging phase of the story. The teenage Sunja falls under the spell of Hansu (Lee Min-Ho), a sharp and charismatic local official who has decided that the best way to survive the occupation is to collaborate with the Japanese and adopt as many trappings of their culture as he can. Their affair inevitably grows messy, requiring the intercession of Isak (Steve Sanghyun Noh), a kind traveling Christian missionary.

Sunja recedes a bit for the Eighties scenes, which feature Solomon returning to Japan from his life in New York to close a huge real-estate deal, and to search once again for his long-missing stepsister. He and a Japanese colleague swap stories about how every American they meet likes to play the "Which Asian am I?" guessing game. Because Korea is rarely a top guess, Solomon says he just nods if anyone suggests he is Japanese. Over the course of the season, we see how he feels caught between the country he grew up in, the one where he built his career, and the one his grandmother tells him about.

Pachinko is technically impressive on all levels – visually stunning, with a knockout score by Nico Muhly. Even subtler devices, like color-coding the subtitles to clarify when characters are speaking Korean or Japanese, work wonders at making the story feel more immersive and poignant. And the opening credits – a raucous musical sequence scored to "Let's Live for Today," by the Grass Roots, and set at the pachinko parlor run by Solomon's father, Mozasu (Soji Arai) – are a great reminder that every show should begin with a dance number.

In the Eighties scenes, Solomon works for the American-born Tom (Jimmi Simpson). When the subject of Japanese-Korean tensions comes up, Tom wonders, "Why can't people just get over that? It's the past. It's done." He is far from the only character in *Pachinko* who only wants to look forward. But early and often, *Pachinko* makes clear that where our people come from, and what they've been through, is always a part of who we are in the present. And it delivers that message with precision force throughout. Don't miss it. ®

Yuh-jung looks back.

APPLE TV+, 2

JIMMY MCGILL'S LAST STAND

THE 'BREAKING BAD' prequel's final season gets off to a slow start with its first two episodes. With most series, this would be a problem. But even more than its parent show, *Better Call Saul* has made its patience into an addictive virtue. The more deliberately the story moves, the more exquisite the agony.

It's been two years since we last saw Jimmy McGill (Bob Odenkirk), Kim Wexler (Rhea Seehorn), and friends, but only a few hours for them. Season Six takes a while both to refresh the audience's memory and move the pieces around the board for the series' endgame. This means another montage of fixer Mike (Jonathan Banks) ransacking someone's home for clues, another intimate Jimmy-Kim argument, and another example of Lalo (Tony Dalton) carefully charming his latest victims to death. But it never feels like

Seehorn and Odenkirk lie in wait.

Better Call Saul

NETWORK	AMC
AIR DATE	April 18
STARRING	Bob Odenkirk Rhea Seehorn Jonathan Banks

★★★★★

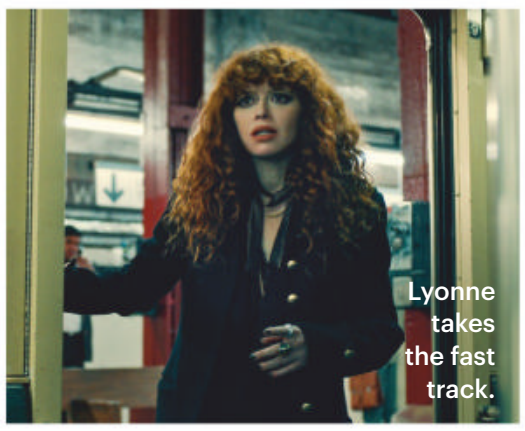
Saul is repeating itself, as the characters keep making huge shifts. The new episodes, for instance, find Jimmy struggling with the role reversal in which Kim is now the ruthless con artist while he's the soft touch constantly worried that they're going too far.

Even this late in the run, you can sense the reluctance of *Saul* creators Vince Gilligan and Peter Gould to let sweet Jimmy transform once and for all into *Breaking Bad*'s hollow, amoral Saul Goodman. Throughout both shows, they have painted themselves and their characters into inescapable corners, then found the most thrilling routes out of them. They should be hemmed in by our knowledge of what happens to Saul, Gus, and Mike once they meet Walter White, yet these episodes still feel alive with possibilities. Bad times are surely coming for all of them, but it's hard not to bask in the energy of spending these final months in the Heisenberg-verse. A.S.

TRIP THROUGH HER WIRES

'RUSSIAN DOLL' Season One – in which Natasha Lyonne's loquacious Nadia kept dying and repeating the events of her 36th-birthday party over and over – was such a perfect high-concept mash-up of metaphysics, arthouse comedy, and character study that it felt hard to imagine the show working on an ongoing basis. Would Nadia and her uptight friend Alan (Charlie Barnett) just start repeating different days each time out?

Instead, the long-delayed new season casts the *Groundhog Day* format aside in favor of sending our heroes traveling through both time and space. A good chunk of the action takes place in the East Village in 1982, as Nadia learns what her mentally ill mother, Nora (Chloë Sevigny), was like before she had a daughter, and there are trips in various eras to Nadia's ancestral homeland of Budapest


Lyonne takes the fast track.

Russian Doll

NETWORK	Netflix
AIR DATE	April 20
STARRING	Natasha Lyonne Charlie Barnett Annie Murphy

★★★★☆

to help solve a mystery about a stolen family fortune.

It's a more sprawling story than the first one, and a bit more scattered in spots as a result. But Lyonne – returning as a writer and director, in addition to an onscreen force of nature – and her collaborators smartly dive right into the new premise without having Nadia or Alan stop to question the cause or nature of any of it. As Nadia tells a loved one, "Inexplicable things happening is my entire modus operandi."

The time-hopping brings in Annie Murphy in a very different mode from Alexis on *Schitt's Creek,* and once again uses science fiction as a device to examine who we are, how we got that way, and whether it's possible to transcend your own history. (Unsurprisingly, Nadia and Alan disagree strongly on this last point.) It's a clever enough reinvention to suggest there's plenty of more life in this series. Maybe there will be aliens next time? A.S.

GREG LEWIS/AMC/SONY PICTURES TELEVISION; NETFLIX

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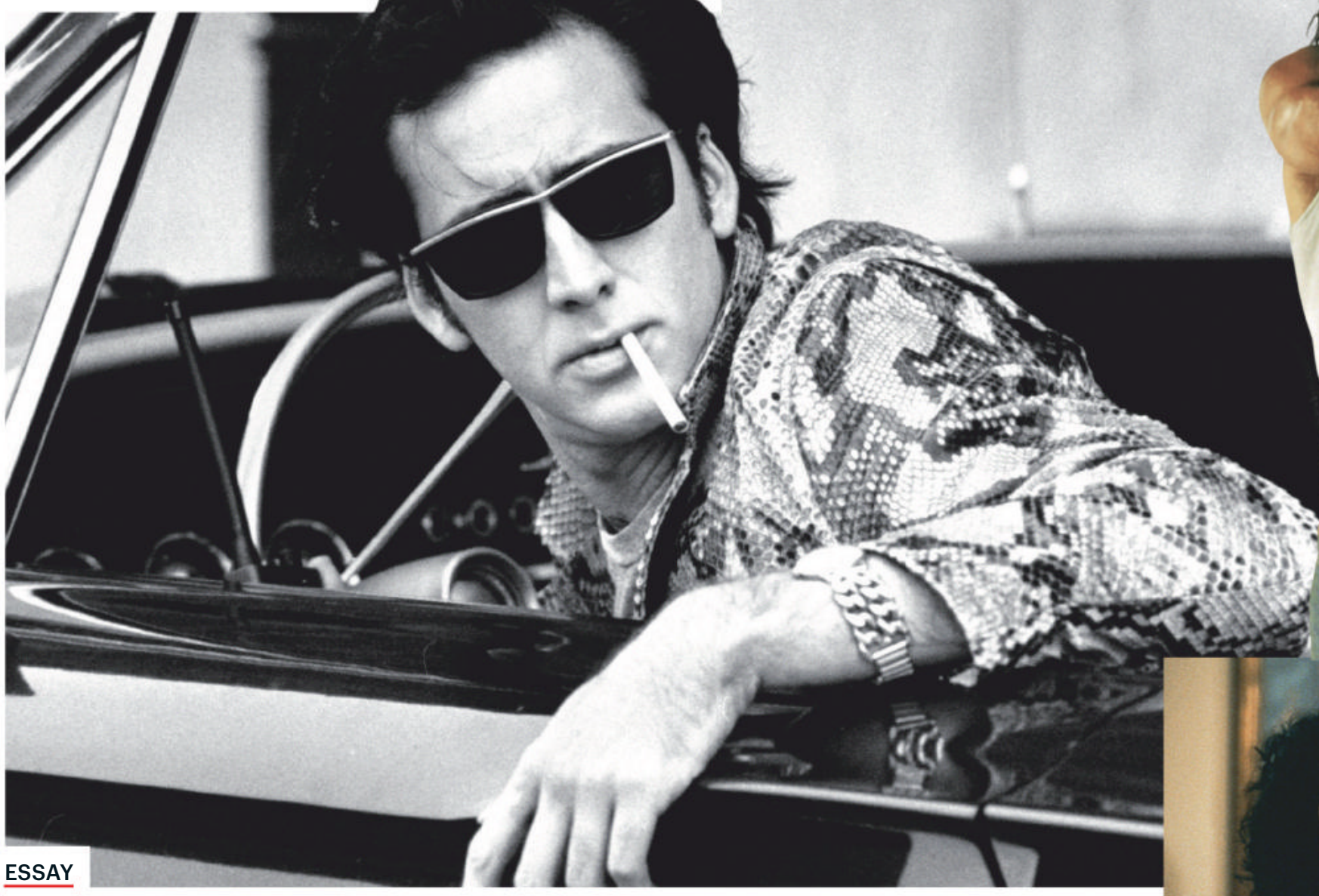


ESSAY

Nicolas Cage: Unhinged Oddball, National Treasure

A tribute to *The Unbearable Weight of Massive Talent* star as he turns a meta comedy into a full-circle victory lap

By DAVID FEAR

IT TAKES a very special actor to turn the alphabet into an aria of weirdness. But there's Nicolas Cage, young and handsome in a 1980s Italian power suit, losing his cool after being told a contract's been misfiled. His response is screaming the alphabet: *A! B! C! D!!!* As he shrieks his way through, yes, all 26 letters, the volume increases and the movements ramp up to an interpretive dance, or maybe an Italian wise guy having a seizure. It ends with Cage, arms crossed and in full toddler-temper-tantrum mode, declaring "I've never misfiled anything. *Not once!*"

This jaw-dropping display is from *Vampire's Kiss,* a.k.a. the 1989 movie in which the actor ate a live cockroach on camera, and a strong contender for what we'll call "Peak Cage." Maybe your pick would be his declaration that a snakeskin jacket is a symbol of his individuality and belief in personal freedom, all uttered in a single breath, in 1990's *Wild at Heart*. Or you'd go with the opening shot of *Leaving Las Vegas,* the 1995 drama about an alcoholic writer that won Cage his only Oscar to date, where he saunters down a liquor aisle, dancing as he fills a shopping cart with bottle after bottle. Like so much Peak Cage, it's ridiculous and sublime, poetic and nonsensical, giggle-inducing and soul-destroying all at once.

Every Cage fan has a handful of these moments. Not every fan would sucker the iconoclastic star into going to a desert island and force him to act out his best-known roles, however, which is the premise behind *The Unbearable Weight of Massive Talent,* the meta comedy that hits theaters on April 22. Featuring Cage as a fictional version of himself – the role he was born to play! – the movie finds the 58-year-old actor accepting $1 million for a billionaire's birthday-party appearance. Except the host is holding the star's family hostage, and the price for their freedom is getting his guest to reenact the greatest hits from the *cinema du* Cage canon.

CAGE'D HEAT Clockwise from left: Cage as the Elvis-worshipping lover boy in *Wild at Heart* (1990); the former prisoner turned hero in the action movie *Con Air* (1997); and the hopeless romantic in *Moonstruck* (1987).

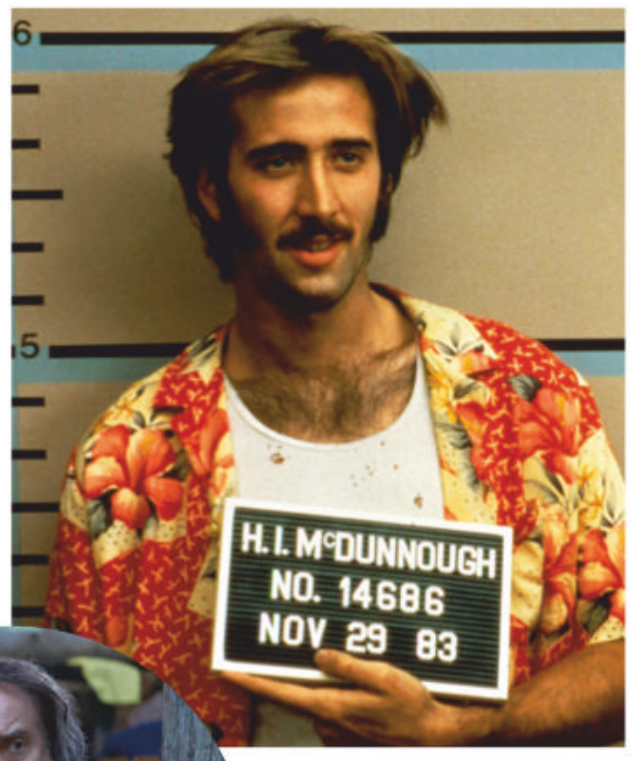
It's a particularly good moment to be a Nicole Cage fan. His work in last year's *Pig,* an intimate character study about a reclusive chef in search of his prize truffle-sniffing pet, has earned him some of the best reviews of his career. *Age of Cage,* a book by ROLLING STONE contributor Keith Phipps that dives deep into Cage's work, has just hit shelves. And there's *Unbearable,* which appears to mine a rich legacy of Peak Cage intensity in the name of both laughs and an affectionate tribute. It feels like we can finally reassess what's been a long, strange 40-year trip without forcing the actor into being a full-time genius or a punchline.

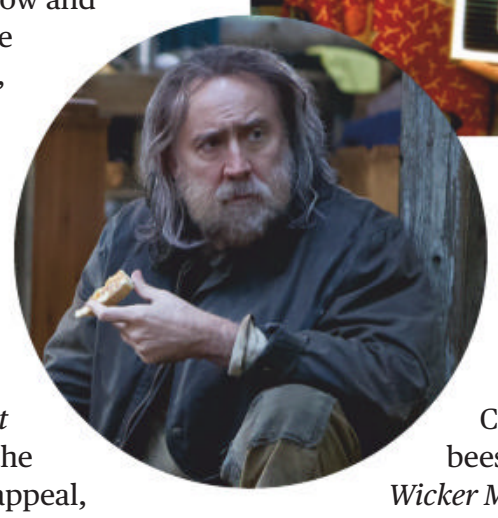
Cage has been declared both over the years, but you could see that there was something unusual about him from the moment you saw his young, scruffy punk rocker in *Valley Girl* (1983), a guy hot enough to be a teen-comedy dreamboat but just enough of an oddball to scrape against the typical hunk-with-heart-of-gold conventions. You immediately wanted to see what this guy would do whenever he showed up onscreen.

For the next 12 years, he'd ping-pong between leading-men roles – is there a more

FROM TOP, LEFT TO RIGHT: ACEY HARPER/GETTY IMAGES; BUENA VISTA PICTURES/EVERETT COLLECTION; MGM/EVERETT COLLECTION

IN THE NIC(S) OF TIME
Top to bottom: Cage dancing his way to an Oscar in *Leaving Las Vegas* (1995); with Deborah Foreman in *Valley Girl* (1983); as H.I. McDunnough in *Raising Arizona* (1987); and an older, wiser (and calmer) Cage in the indie character study *Pig* (2021).





hopeless romantic than Ronny Cammareri, the one-handed, opera-loving baker who sweeps Cher off her feet in *Moonstruck*? – and lunatics. Watch those movies now and you see how he'd hit the middle point between those opposites, and for every interesting mistake (his voice in *Peggy Sue Got Married,* which Cage claimed was inspired by Gumby's horse, Pokey), you get something like his walking, talking Looney Tune in *Raising Arizona,* or his retro-hipster Romeo in David Lynch's *Wild at Heart*. Who else could pull off the latter's perfect melding of sex appeal, surrealism, and rebel-without-a-clue sincerity? Who else could turn a line like "You filthy piece of white . . . trash?" into a question and still make it work?

That fertile part of his career peaks with *Leaving Las Vegas,* which adds pathos to his onscreen volatility and momentarily coronates him as Mr. Cage, Serious Actor. Which makes the transition to action hero a bit confusing. *The Rock* (1996) essentially drops a typical Cage eccentric – the nerdy Beatles obsessive Stanley Goodspeed – into a Michael Bay movie as a way of spicing things up. By *Con Air* (1997), he's the pumped-up main attraction. The final entry of his post-Oscar multiplex-spectacle trifecta, *Face/Off* (also 1997), gives him a lot of room to display his chops and color outside the lines. Maybe this detour is the start of something wonderful?

What happens next is a series of occasional highs and a whole lot of lows. He works with some name directors, like Spike Jonze (*Adaptation*, which deservedly nabs Cage a second Oscar nomination) and Ridley Scott (*Matchstick Men*). An *Indiana Jones*-lite franchise via *National Treasure* keeps him in the spotlight.

When he plays a superhero (*Ghost Rider*), Cage mostly exercises what he's called his "Western Kabuki" (read: loud and unhinged) style of acting. Check out the "Not the bees!" meme from his 2006 *Wicker Man* remake and you'll see what we mean. Well-publicized financial woes prompt him to sign up for films that mainly trade off his star power and this-performance-goes-to-11 outrageousness.

It wasn't like he ever left: You could still hear his voice in animated movies like *The Croods* and *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse,* still find a diamond like 2018's revenge movie *Mandy* glittering in the dung heap. But with *Pig,* Cage had a chance to play someone quiet, numb, still wounded from tragedy, and left adrift in a world that prized flashiness over substance. You witness something besides self-parody. He reminds you he could press pause on the sound and fury.

Coming off the heels of that triumph, the time now feels right to give the public something like *Unbearable Weight* – what could have been a mournful trip down memory lane for fans now comes off like a victory lap. Having proven he can still bring his A game, we can watch him send up his C-list status. And maybe, just maybe, we can witness an older and wiser Cage scream the alphabet one more time – not in the name of reliving his glory days, but reclaiming something old in the name of starting some bold new chapter. ®

FROM TOP LEFT TO RIGHT: MGM/EVERETT COLLECTION; ATLANTIC RELEASING/EVERETT COLLECTION; 20TH CENTURY FOX FILM CORP./EVERETT COLLECTION; DAVID REAMER/EVERETT COLLECTION

[*Cont. from 29*] Smoker. Smoker. Classic. This bitch got smokers!"

"It's crazy how we, technically, need all of these shits to do what we're really trying to do out here," says Nemo Achida, Harlow's A&R guy, co-producer, and sometime co-writer, who had a rap career of his own a few years back. "To really smack people across the face the way we want to, and put my boy on Mount Rushmore."

In addition to BPMs and key signatures, each song is marked as either a "sometimes" or "always," a metric that Harlow is convinced says everything about a track. "Nail Tech" is a "sometimes"; "Face of My City," from his last album, is a "never," he half-jokes. "Is it a song that you want to hear at any moment, in all moods," Harlow explains. "Or is it meant for just one mood – for the club or before you work out? I have to get over my burning desire to make all of the songs on an album 'always,' because then it never cuts through. But I listen to fuckin' *Late Registration* – so many 'always' on there. *Nothing Was the Same*? So many 'always' on there. But you can't let it steer the ship."

Harlow's rising stature in hip-hop could probably be gauged by the team he's bringing together every night in the studio: virtuoso keyboardist Roget Chahayed, nominated for a Producer of the Year Grammy this year for work with Doja Cat and others (that's him on that unforgettable keyboard intro to Travis Scott's "Sicko Mode"), and onetime Timbaland protégé and West collaborator Angel Lopez, a wizard with drums and percussion. Over the course of six hours in the studio, Chahayed casually tosses off literally hundreds of musical ideas, coaxing Steve Wonder-worthy harmonica parts or a woozy New Orleans horn section or eerie choirs of voices from his keyboard. Achida functions as a sort of executive producer, guiding them to his favorite sections or adding his own drum ideas.

The main goal is to make sure that the songs develop musically as they go along. "We're doing shit with the production to make you continue to listen to a song," Harlow says. "That's been the whole mission."

Harlow doesn't want too many details out yet about the songs or guest stars yet, but he does acknowledge that his team has been talking to Dolly Parton's people about recording with her: "I want to put her on some hard shit," he says.

While Harlow takes an endless phone call about the "Nail Tech" music video, the team improvises a beat from scratch, based on a foreboding two-chord sequence. Harlow jumps on the beat when he comes back to the studio, recording a verse or two that he quickly abandons.

"I don't always have something to say in every moment," he says. "I have to search for a feeling that's real. It's different when you're not a street artist because a lot of street artists come from an environment that is constantly producing stuff you can make a movie about. Or they just jump to a gun line. There's weight on a gun line, no matter how frivolously or nonchalant they say it. I remember a Kanye interview while he's making *Graduation,* and he says, 'You know how hard it is for me to write these songs? I can't just jump to a gun bar. Because I'm not a street artist, every line has to be compelling.' "

Eventually they turn their attention to a song called "Blade of Grass," which has a moody instrumental intro before Harlow jumps in with an unforgettable first line, "Like a blade of grass wants sunlight/I just want that ass."

They have Chahayed do take after take of a faux Stevie-harmonica intro, trying to fix the awkward way it interacts with the drums and the beginning of the vocals, until Achida suddenly suggests slicing out the intro entirely: What if they started with Harlow's voice a cappella?

The idea catches on a bit before midnight, and the group ends up spending at least an hour making the change, devoting most of the time to obsessing over the exact spot the beat should come in. "Come in on 'ass,' " Achida suggests at one point, to much laughter.

Once they finally get it right, Harlow is thrilled. "Bro, this shit is classic," he says. "We just trimmed so much fat off this. It's a rap record now. We need shockers on this bitch. We're coming in trying to hold our dick on these motherfuckers."

Soon, the evening seems to be winding down. "I think we should dead it," Harlow says around 1:30 a.m. There's some mumbling around the room: half day? Harlow smirks. "Unless . . . somebody's feeling inspired," he says. They end up staying for at least another hour and a half.

"People could ask, 'Is it right for you as a white person to rap?' But people see I have an innate passion for rapping, so they don't ask me that question."

THIS IS HARLOW'S imitation of the "serious part" of every interview he's ever done: "So, you're white . . . " After a big dinner in a private back room of a Mexican fusion restaurant – Ciera, Tierra, Nemo, his trainer CJ, Jack's parents, and his manager are all there – we head back up to 21c's penthouse, just the two of us this time. There is, to be sure, white-rapper stuff to talk about.

But more broadly, especially after meeting his very proud, still happily married parents, it's hard not to wonder: In the absence of any perceivable trauma, or even anything particularly missing in his life, what's driving him? "I grew up with a lot of love," he says, leaning back on his chair, one hand casually resting on his crotch. "I grew up with a pretty happy disposition. I'd say I had a great upbringing. So that's a great question. It's really a question I want to wrestle with with my therapist. Why do I care so much? Why am I so ambitious? But I just am. It's me, bro. I wake up and I'm hungry. I think a lot of times you're right, ambition does come from damage. But it comes from passion for me. I want to live the richest life I can. I just want to feel everything that I could possibly feel. I'm not satisfied with living, like, average life."

Even though he's quit drinking, Harlow might not be averse to some weed once in a while, except that it has a kryptonite-like effect on him. "When I get high, I lose my poise," he says. "I lose a lot of what I like about myself. I think it's a control factor, too. I lose a little control. I take pride in having my wits about me and being on point. Being quick, being thoughtful, making the right decision. Shit makes me subconsciously self-loathing. When I'm high I feel like I'm a piece of shit, and everyone knows." Hallucinogens apparently have the opposite effect; he wrote some of the most swagged-out lines on the new album while "shroomed out." If any other substances were involved in his songwriting, he's not saying: "I don't want kids to think that's the key to be creative. I know a lot of kids listen to me."

Even without weed, Harlow is paranoid about being "canceled," though he can't quite imagine for what. He can be sure, at least, that there are no recordings of him using racial slurs. "That's one thing I never have to worry about, thank God," he says. "I don't say that shit [even] under my breath in my room by myself."

The most serious incident of Harlow's career involved his former DJ, Ronnie Lucciano, a.k.a. Ronnie O'Bannon, who is accused of killing a woman at a Harlow concert last May (O'Bannon's lawyer has said it was self-defense). With criminal charges and a lawsuit pending, Harlow can't say much about that one. "I was down for weeks off of that," he says. "It's definitely one of the darker things that I've ever faced."

Tory Lanez and DaBaby both appeared on 2020's "What's Poppin'" remix, before each faced deeply tarnished reputations; Lanez has been charged with shooting Megan Thee Stallion, and DaBaby unleashed homophobic remarks. Harlow faced pressure to remove them from the song, which never made sense to him, especially since the incidents happened after they recorded with him. "I know I'm a good person," he says, after a very long pause. "My character, my integrity are very important to me. And I think I've done such a good job that now I'm being forced to answer for other people's actions. It doesn't feel right as a grown man to speak for other grown men all the time. . . . One thing's for sure, is that Megan got shot. And I wish her nothing but love and respect."

Harlow is all too aware of one of the cringiest moments in rap history, when Macklemore not only apologized to Kendrick Lamar in 2014 for the positively deranged decision by the Recording Academy to give best rap album to *Thrift Shop* instead of *To Pimp a Butterfly,* but also posted his text to Lamar online. "I vividly remember that moment, and I vividly remember the reaction," Harlow says. "Yeah, that's hip-hop history right there. I don't have any criticism of it, because you never know how someone felt in a certain moment. And what's scary about the internet is you can make impulsive decisions, and they live on forever."

For his part, Harlow is comfortable with gunning for the best-in-his-generation slot. But does he have the right to do so as a white man in a black genre? "This is a question I've asked myself," he says. "But at the end of the day, people could ask, 'Is it right for you as a white person to rap?' But people see I have an innate passion for rapping, so they don't ask me that question. . . . There's a competitive side to this, and honoring the competition makes it even more real and hip-hop, instead of me saying" – he affects a wimpy voice – 'Hey, I shouldn't have won that.' " He returns to that Macklemore moment: "That's why they didn't like that text, because it's even more 'I'm not as hip-hop,' you know what I'm saying?"

Harlow smiles. "I'm saying, I love this shit so much that I'm gonna go out on that court and play as hard as you're playing," he says. "And we're not gonna discuss if it's OK. Let's play ball." It's past 1 a.m. In a few minutes, Ciera and Tahira will be rejoining him. The movie rolls on. "I'm here to play ball."

JEFF ZUCKER

[*Cont. from 51*] Time Warner in 2018). That is until Jason Kilar took over as Warner CEO in May 2020 and began overhauling the sprawling entertainment and media conglomerate. One of his first decisions: to remove Zucker's oversight of CNN's finances, human resources, and corporate communications, the division run by Gollust. Zucker had no input in the matter, and was given just 24 hours' notice. The move prompted several journalists to query WarnerMedia about the relationship between Zucker and Gollust.

At the same time, a variety of storms were closing in. By February 2021, Gov. Cuomo had become embroiled in a growing #MeToo scandal in which he was accused of sexual misconduct by 11 women. New York Attorney General Letitia James conducted her own investigation into the matter, with the results indicating that *New Day* anchor Chris Cuomo had reached out to "sources," including other reporters, to gauge whether more women were going to come forward, and relayed what he was hearing to his brother's advisers. Even more shocking, Gollust played a role behind the scenes as Andrew Cuomo navigated the fallout; she connected with Chris as he guided his brother's response to the claims, according to sources, much as Time's Up Legal Defense Fund co-founders Roberta Kaplan and Tina Tchen had. (Those women resigned in August 2021 over their involvement in the governor's handling of the sexual-harassment allegations.)

Controversies continued to pile up for Zucker. In June 2021, he was criticized for allowing CNN's chief legal analyst, Jeffrey Toobin, to return to the air after he'd exposed himself on a Zoom with *New Yorker* magazine colleagues. In September, as Cravath, Swaine & Moore launched its investigation into Chris Cuomo, Zucker steadfastly backed the anchor. In December, the actor Jussie Smollett testified in his case involving a falsely reported hate crime that he'd received advice from Lemon in the aftermath of the incident, prompting him not to hand over his phone records to Chicago police; the issue was never raised internally at the network.

Early that same month, the tide apparently turned on Chris Cuomo when Washington, D.C., attorney Debra Katz sent a letter to CNN's general counsel stating she represented a Jane Doe who claimed she was sexually assaulted by Cuomo when he was an anchor for ABC's *20/20*; the woman wanted CNN to hold Cuomo responsible for his actions. (A Cuomo representative says, "These apparently anonymous allegations are not true.")

On Dec. 4, CNN fired Cuomo for cause. (A WarnerMedia source says the assault allegation was not a factor.) Six days later, CNN fired Cuomo's *New Day* producer John Griffin following his indictment by a federal grand jury in Vermont for attempting to lure minors as young as nine to engage in unlawful sexual activity. (Griffin has pleaded not guilty.) That same month, news surfaced that police in Virginia had launched a criminal probe into Rick Saleeby, who resigned from his post as a senior producer on Jake Tapper's *The Lead*; that investigation also involved allegations from "potential juvenile victims." Heller says that "Jeff had no knowledge of either of these two producers' behavior." But by the time the Cravath investigation brought Zucker and Gollust's misdeeds to Kilar's attention in late January, the writing was on the wall for Zucker.

Kilar acted swiftly to oust the media industry's most high-profile executive, who departed without severance. But Zucker, ever the master at shaping the narrative, negotiated the terms of his Feb. 2 exit, sources familiar with the matter say, citing only the supposedly recent, undisclosed romantic relationship with Gollust. (Nothing about journalistic lapses was mentioned, although at least two publications, ROLLING STONE and the *New York Post,* invoked the Andrew Cuomo ties.) A number of high-paid anchors, like Lemon and Tapper, bemoaned their fallen leader on air in hyperbolic terms that reflect the loyalty Zucker instilled in his favorite talent. (Tapper: "[Chris Cuomo] threatened Jeff. Jeff said, 'We don't negotiate with terrorists.' And Chris blew the place up. How do we get past that perception – that this is the bad guy winning?"

In his wake, Zucker leaves a media landscape more fractured than ever, with public distrust of journalists at an all-time high. And why not, when a peek behind the curtain reveals secret dealings between his news outlets and the politicians they're supposed to hold to account, coverage dictated not by the issues but by whatever sensational dreck would keep eyes glued to the screen, and newsrooms where alleged predators roamed freely? Zucker may not have invented the culture of powerful men exploiting the women around them, but he incubated it for the modern media age, empowering people who were supposed to hold the public's trust – but couldn't even be trusted to keep their hands off of their subordinates. Perhaps most damning, he leaves a political landscape warped by a man he was all too proud to use for ratings throughout his career.

"I understood who and what Donald Trump was, because I was from New York, and I understood that he was just a one-man publicity machine," Zucker told an audience of college students back in 2011. "Even if the show wasn't good, he was going to say it was good. Even if the ratings weren't good, he was going to say the ratings were great. Nobody could generate publicity like Donald Trump. And by the way, that turned out to be entirely true."

Now, many are waiting to see how the onetime wiz kid will reinvent himself again. Though a journalism job would seem out of the question given all that went down at two networks on his watch, a return to show business is within the realm of possibility. He has also said he would love to run the Miami Dolphins, and hasn't ruled out a run for office himself. Wherever he lands, former colleagues are sure it'll be on his feet. "Don't hold the garage sale for Jeff Zucker," says one. "Someone will hire him. He's too smart."

And as for the impact he's had on American culture, some say it's too early to call. "It's a 100 percent fair assessment to say Jeff laid the groundwork for a Trump presidency," says Touchet. "From the beginning, there was a symbiotic relationship. But I don't know if that's Jeff's legacy, because I don't think he's done. I know Jeff, and he's not going away. I don't know where he's going to land, but there's too much drive and power hunger to sit sideways for too long."

UKRAINE

[*Cont. from 20*] loaded AKs. Anyone entering would have their identity verified, their weapons cleared of ammo, and their bags checked.

That evening I asked B.A. why he was in Ukraine, why he wanted to be involved in this war.

"It's very evidently just," he reflected. "You don't have to go into a long maze of chemical weapons and tribal issues. It is a democracy – yes, with problems, but so are we. It is a sovereign country that has been invaded. And that's wrong. Full stop." In other words: some of the camaraderie and adrenaline and sense of purpose that comes with war, but without the moral black hole at the center of being an occupier.

"I literally didn't know that we were independently standing up a militia," Faceman said. "I thought it was going to be coordinated. But fuck . . . we are doing this on our own. We are basically creating an army."

I thought about that army, the squads of amateur fighters moving down the street during training: law students, entrepreneurs, young men and women. I pictured them confronting one decent crew of Russian soldiers with a PKM belt-fed machine gun. I pictured bodies in the dirt.

Late one night I challenged Hannibal and Faceman about whether this wasn't all some romanticized adventure. Were they compensating for their role in America's dirty wars? "I have no illusions about combat, and I don't have anything to prove about what I did in Afghanistan," Hannibal said forcefully.

Wasn't he concerned that former American military officers training Ukrainians could be a proximate cause for a war between NATO and Russia?

"We aren't doing anything that NATO isn't on a larger scale," he said. "These volunteers are going to fight. They will do it without training, or they can do it with some training. But they're going to do it."

Faceman jumped in: "There will be children who die. There will be Russian soldiers who die. There will be Ukrainians who die. And the worst part of this, is that this is one man's war."

While the training continued, I was still trying to figure out if Ukraine's "foreign legion" was actually being created as a military unit, or whether it was intended that the participation of foreigners be limited to the kind of volunteer civil-defense training that Hannibal was conducting.

One of Tawnia's contacts told her that foreign fighters were indeed being allowed to enter Ukraine. A few days later, a picture of several foreigners in military kit "defending Kyiv" started circulating on social media. It appeared some foreigners were in fact taking up arms to defend Ukraine.

Hannibal told me a lot of military and "military-adjacent" people had been reaching out to him with complicated plans for getting involved.

"They'll message me saying 'Get in touch with this guy, and meet that guy, and get keys to this apartment, and set up transport for blah, blah, blah. . . .' They're back in the states. But we are here."

The situation was too fluid, he said, for him to have a longer-term plan other than the immediate training program. But he was certain motivated people could get involved if they felt compelled to do so.

"That's the truth of war. You take an incredible risk to show up to a place, they're not gonna turn you away. If you want to participate in the war, you can," Hannibal concluded. "That's one of the ways you know this is a real war."

[*Cont. from 59*] here, I'd be like, 'No way – they're in the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame,'" McLynn says. "'What do they need to play a private gig for?' But they're all doing it."

When live music went into lockdown in March 2020, so did the private-gig world. But it didn't completely shut down: During the height of the pandemic, artists including Sting, Leon Bridges, Keith Urban, Christina Aguilera, and Ryan Tedder of OneRepublic were hired for virtual private concerts, for fees starting at just under $100,000 and rising into the mid six figures.

But last year, as concerts began returning to some degree of normalcy, the way-under-the-radar bookings began to increase. This year, CAA alone has more than 700 events (both private and corporate) planned, each featuring one of its music acts. (Norman declines to specify which, but the company's roster includes Lionel Richie, Bon Jovi, the Doobie Brothers, and Earth, Wind, and Fire.) According to two leading talent agencies, corporate-party gigs once accounted for the bulk of such exclusive shows, about 75 percent, but private ones are inching up from 25 to 40 percent of that combined income. "There are so many great opportunities out there, and more to come," says manager Michael Lippman, one of whose acts, Matchbox Twenty, has hit the private-party circuit. "It's much bigger now than it was then." Sometimes, the party hosts initiate the discussions, reaching out to talent agencies – and finding the right match of music, audience, and remuneration.

Even as Omicron was starting to hit last fall, the music and the festivities didn't completely stop. In December, Lenny Kravitz and the controversial rapper T.I. were hired for undisclosed fees to play at a waterfront property in Miami owned by flush art collector and coal-family scion Wayne Boich. The occasion was Richard Mille After Dark, celebrating the high-end Swiss watchmaker. To a crowd that included Venus and Serena Williams, Leonardo DiCaprio, and *Wolf of Wall Street* inspiration Jordan Belfort, Kravitz emerged to play a set, followed at midnight by T.I. – as a yacht pulled up alongside to watch them.

Thanks to confidentiality agreements, the fees collected by the artists can be hard to pin down: They can range from five-figure deals to what one booker calls "six- or seven-figure situations" for pop icons. "I am constantly coaching my clients through their sticker shock," says Siegan, citing a seven-figure price tag from Bruno Mars; another source says Mars can command as much as $4 million.

"Probably bands that were a little hesitant to do them are more willing to now," says McGrath. "[The hosts] usually have their own Covid protocol, and there are less people involved. You're not carrying your crew, you're not carrying buses, so it's high reward, less risk. And so what's not to love about that? A lot of them are destination events in Cabo, the Bahamas, Hawaii. It's like, 'Yeah, twist my arm.'"

For some musicians, the appeal isn't always financial. "The private events will try to cater to the artist more than the average promoter," says Kevin Monty of Red Light Management, which manages Phish, the Dave Matthews Band, Valerie June, and many others. "Give them nicer wine or access to lodging that might be exclusive, and the catering is better than a club gig." Artists can make their own demands – like, in rare instances, no dancing during their sets. "It's a great way to network and exchange ideas with people who may be like-minded, but not in the same professional arena as you," says one artist who's played a private show.

Whether they want to entertain the thought or not, pop acts are newly reconsidering super-private shows thanks to Covid: They may want to compensate for lost touring revenue, help support their crew, keep up their chops, augment their low streaming income, or all of the above. "There are probably some artists out there who will try to make up for lost time and be a bit more active than they might have otherwise been," says Red Light's Monty. "People have a sense of obligation to their band and crew to give them the opportunity to work. That was largely taken away, but now is the chance." Adds Siegan, "It's such a significant revenue stream for bands who are in demand. I'm frankly amazed by artists who shy away from this, particularly in this new music economy, where there's less revenue from record sales."

But with the uptick in such gigs and the outsize paychecks has come a new code of silence. Increasingly, musicians and party planners have to sign nondisclosure agreements. Through their representatives, many of these artists declined to discuss the events or fees with Rolling Stone or did not respond to requests to do so; the same with some of the higher-profile hosts. In some cases, guests have had to hand over their cellphones to avoid photos leaking on social media. "It's super-confidential," says agent Greg Janese of UTA, which also books many of its clients for private events, like Pitbull, Flo Rida, and other contemporary acts. "We get a lot of offers for upper-high-end private parties, where you get to sign a nondisclosure. People just don't want it out that they're booking these kinds of parties."

"There was the undertone of 'You're dancing with the devil,' or you're a corporate whore. But we came home with a load of money."

–Jesus Jones' Mike Edwards

In the U.K., the catering company Global Infusion Group (and its offshoot Eat to the Beat) has provided food for many such events. Among the most recent was a wedding at a castle with a major pop act – and that's all CEO Bonnie May can say about it. "For some certain clients that love the confidentiality, it's a great attraction in terms of working for us, and we are really, really strict," May says. "There is just a no-go area in terms of sharing that on social media."

Given the way that those in the field predict business will go in the next few years, it's unlikely that such a veil of secrecy will be lifted anytime soon. "When things started to return to 'normal,' whatever the hell that is, it still wasn't considered prudent to be throwing lavish parties," Siegan says. "That said, there is an air of excitement with many of our clients around throwing parties, impressing their friends and colleagues, and just going over the top again. It feels like an impending Roaring Twenties."

In 2005, David H. Brooks, whose company built bulletproof vests for the military, hired Stevie Nicks, Steven Tyler and Joe Perry, Tom Petty, the Eagles, 50 Cent, Nelly, and others for a bat mitzvah for his teenage daughter, paying some of them in the low millions. Two years later, he was arrested for (among other allegations) insider trading and using company money to pay for his lavish lifestyle; he was serving 17 years in prison before his death in 2016. "This guy ended up being a crook, and it was a nightmare," says Janese, who was working at the time with Tyler and Nicks. "It was just a bummer that that happened."

Organizing private-bash events can be a headache on any number of levels, which sometimes includes transforming someone's house into a concert space. "You need an experienced production manager," says manager Jonathan Wolfson, whose clients, such as Hall and Oates, have played private parties (including one at a Long Island estate, where Hall and Oates were joined onstage by Jamie Foxx). "There are safety issues. Sometimes stages have to be built, and not everyone's backyard is set up for an event." In 2016, Sia was offered $1 million for a backyard event in St. Barts, for which the host was prepared to build a dance floor and canopy with a clear roof. But in the end, Sia pulled out when her camp realized that the small outdoor space couldn't accommodate her full, normal production and dancers.

Vetting the people putting up the money is even more complicated. Given that the $10 million Brooks used for his daughter's party was cited by the Justice Department as one of his financial misuses, the incident reveals the potential red flags involved in such paydays. In 2013, Lopez sang "Happy Birthday" to the president of Turkmenistan, the Central Asia nation just north of Iran. There, according to the Human Rights Watch report that year, "human rights defenders and other activists face the constant threat of government reprisal. The government continues to use imprisonment as a tool for political retaliation." (The report also cited President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow's "cult of personality.") After receiving backlash for the show, which was held at a lavish resort in the country, Lopez's camp issued a statement that "had there been knowledge of human rights issues of any kind, Jennifer would not have attended."

According to a source, Billie Eilish was offered seven figures for a Middle Eastern gig and passed. Train turned down a big-payday show in that part of the world as well. "It was a guy who made money in the diamond business," says McLynn, "and we didn't feel comfortable doing it."

"Some artists are more selective and want to know all about who they're performing for, more so for the private events," says Adam Grayson of the talent booking agency GrayRock Entertainment, which helps arrange for musical acts to play for clients. "They're not going to just blindly go into something, and often they do want to know the politics. Some don't care, some do."

In the meantime, the circuit isn't going anywhere, and neither are the paychecks. Matchbox Twenty and Sugar Ray this year are each booked for weddings in the Bahamas and Canada, respectively. McGrath does specify that playing a wedding doesn't mean he'll be introducing the couple or playing a first-dance song. "They'll have a big hall or a club, and we'll play," he says. "It's not Adam Sandler in *The Wedding Singer*. But I'm not saying that's not going to be my future."

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[*Cont. from 67*] "They're getting out, they're getting out," he told one of his fellow soldiers, repeating the words. He then threw up and stumbled toward the airport's main terminal, where Gen. Donahue had set up shop. He found a spot in a hallway outside an abandoned dining hall and laid down on the floor, his helmet his only pillow. He was asleep in seconds.

IN THE TV MOVIE, this is when the credits roll. But Roufi had 12 more days in Kabul. He had saved his family, but now he had to help others. Two days later, Roufi was ordered by Gen. Donahue to help 1st Lt. Shekib and another Afghan American soldier get their families out. Shekib was still apprehensive about taking time off from his duties for a personal quest and had to be counseled by the division chaplain that it was OK.

Roufi checked the gates through the 82nd's video cameras and saw the North Gate was the least chaotic. He told Shekib to tell his family to make their way there as quickly as possible.

After Shekib's sister recovered from her shock that her brother was on the ground and less than three miles away, he told her to call his mother-in-law and sister-in-law. He told them to come to the North Gate with nothing more than what they could carry. He asked her to send a photo of what she was wearing so he might try to spot her in the crowd.

"Don't change your clothes," Shekib told her. "This is the only way I can find you."

His sister had another concern. She wanted to bring $2,000 in American money, but she feared some American soldier might steal it when she got inside the gate.

Shekib's voice rose with exasperation as he heard her fear.

"They are not going to steal your money," he told her. "Soldiers don't do that to each other."

Their first attempt was a failure. It was near midnight when they arrived, and with the crowds and darkness they couldn't get close enough to the gate where Shekib could see them. Roufi offered his fellow soldier some advice.

"Tell them to come to the North Gate in the morning," he told Shekib. "It won't be so crazy."

Shekib passed on the new plan to his sister. He then connected her with the two brothers and mother of Sgt. Sayeed Omar, another 82nd Airborne soldier trying to get his family out of Kabul.

Daylight provided easier sight lines but posed different problems. The crowds were even larger and unmanageable. The desperate Afghans were sent into a further panic when the Taliban began firing into the air in order to drive the mob back. Sgt. Omar's brother was struck in the face with the butt of an AK-47.

Eventually, Shekib spotted his sister. He had another soldier vigorously point that she and the rest of her party needed to work their way to his left. This was a mistake. The entire crowd saw the American's hand gesture and they moved as a mob in that direction, nearly crushing Shekib's family. Shekib called his sister back and told her he would have the soldier signal again, but this time they should move in the opposite direction of where he pointed. That worked, and the six Afghans went against the wave of refugees. Still, others in the mob saw through the misdirection and grabbed at Shekib's family. Shekib continued not to make direct eye contact with his sister, lest the Taliban connect them, but he stole a glance and caught a glimpse of her face. She had grown from a girl into a young woman since Shekib last saw her in 2008, and he recognized the sheer terror in her eyes. She had a hunted look on her face that he said would haunt him for the rest of his life.

The six reached the gate and grasped hands. Shekib and Omar formed a chain with some other soldiers and began pulling them through, one by one. His sister-in-law was last. A man Shekib had never seen held tightly to her hand. He spoke to Shekib in Pashto.

"I am her husband."

Shekib barked back.

"No, you're not."

He wrested the man's vise-like grip on his sister-in-law and pulled her through. They were free.

FAZEL ROUFI'S DAYS blended into a horrifying sameness. Part of the day would be spent with Donahue's senior staff translating papers and communications coming in from the Taliban, and the rest would be spent at the gates, trying to bring in Afghan Americans and Afghans with papers.

It was a hellscape that Dante could not have envisioned. On the day that he helped 1st Lt. Shekib's family, Roufi watched the Marines try to keep control of the North Gate, driving the crowd back by shooting in the air and throwing flash-bang grenades. One exploded near a small child, tearing up his little face.

Roufi and the other American soldiers were told repeatedly not to cross the line into the crowd on the Afghan side of the gate, lest they be pulled into the throng and dragged away. It made sense, but it was so hard not to physically offer support when you saw so much misery and suffering. One afternoon, Roufi was translating for accepted Afghans when he saw the crowd surge forward toward the concertina wire separating the Afghans from the gate. Bodies began to pile up on top of one another. Roufi saw an old woman gasping for air at the bottom of the scrum, her lined face perilously close to being slashed by the wire. Roufi moved as close as he could to the wire and shouted at the woman.

"Grab my leg and don't let go."

The woman did as she was told, and the bodies were pulled off her. Roufi thought she was just another desperate Afghan, but then she staggered to her feet and spoke to him, flashing an American passport.

"I am a U.S. citizen. I am from California."

The woman began to recede into the retreating mob. Roufi grabbed her arm and pulled her toward the Marines, who did not want to let her through since she was alone and not part of a sanctioned group. He shouted above the clamor.

"She has an American passport. Let her in."

A Marine yanked on her and pulled her through to the processing line. She turned back toward Roufi.

"Thank you."

He never saw her again.

ALL THE GATES into HKIA had different challenges and horrors. Shekib worked the South Gate, both translating and supervising enlisted translators. There were sharpshooters on the roof of a nearby terminal who had a panoramic view of the entire field of action. Down on the ground, Shekib stood more than 100 yards behind the Taliban lines with Marines and Army soldiers posted in a horseshoe pattern, with an eye on the gate. From that distance, Shekib could still see women holding their infants over their heads, as if saying, "If you can't take me, take my child."

Communicating with the Taliban had all the orderliness of a Three Stooges routine, and would have been equally hilarious if some elements of the Taliban weren't brutalizing the Afghan crowds. Shekib and other soldiers would make their way to a chaotic middle ground, just short of the surging crowds, and present an older Taliban soldier with a printout of State Department-approved departees who should be allowed to pass through the gate. Invariably, an hour or two would pass and Shekib and the other soldiers would approach the Taliban and ask for a progress report.

"Is the bus ready to come through?" asked Shekib. "We're ready for them."

There would be much fumbling in the pockets, and the Taliban might pull out an exit list from two or three days ago, rarely the one that Shekib had given them an hour earlier. They'd try to stall and make small talk with Shekib.

"You look like a good Afghan. How did you end up serving in the imperialist's army?"

Shekib lied. He told them that his father was Afghan, but he had been raised in the states by his American mother. Giving them real information, he reasoned, could only end badly for his family.

Invariably the younger Taliban soldier would defer to the older Taliban man who Shekib deduced was the boss, since he didn't carry a rifle and was chauffeured for short distances that the other Taliban made on foot.

This maddening routine continued for days. Shekib and the others couldn't tell if it was incompetence – not a great feeling for American soldiers who had just lost a war to the Taliban – or something more sinister. The more the Taliban played themselves as fumbling buffoons, the slower the Afghans moved through the gates, a disconcerting development as the calendar moved toward Aug. 31, the agreed-upon American departure date. Shekib eventually came to an inevitable conclusion: The Taliban didn't want Afghans to leave the country. They wanted to run out the clock.

Shekib watched the older Taliban soldier with increasing interest. During one conversation, the man's pocket began to ring and he wrestled with three or four phones, speaking into one in Pashto before realizing it was the wrong one. He flipped open a different one and began speaking in English with a Pakistani accent. It wasn't until Shekib was back in the United States that he was able to identify the older man. He was Soahaib Saeed, the leader of the Taliban's elite Badri Brigade, their version of special forces.

Gen. Donahue continued talking with Mohlis, his Taliban counterpart, on a regular basis. Despite the Taliban's delay tactics, every day, more Afghans were flying to safety, reaching 14,000 refugees exiting on Aug. 20.

While Mohlis held the land and many of the airport-adjacent buildings that Donahue had used as command posts on earlier deployments, Donahue still controlled the sky, and that provided him with information about the Taliban's movements. He also hinted to Mohlis that there were credible threats of suspicious men and vehicles operating near the gates.

According to a senior Army officer, Donahue shared something more personal with Mohlis. ISIS-K had targeted him for death.

"Be careful. They're coming for you."

Mohlis paused before responding through his translator.

"How do you know?"

"Because I've seen the intelligence. They're coming for you, and they're coming for me."

ABBEY GATE WAS supposed to be already closed. From the start, it had been a ticking time bomb. It was the one entrance where the Taliban held the high ground of midlevel buildings that provided a view of all the American operations. Conversely, the American soldiers had limited sights on the men and women being checked for documents. Meanwhile, American intelligence had identified a legitimate threat targeting Abbey Gate at an undetermined hour. Gen. Donahue and Adm. Vasley decided to close down the gate that afternoon, and their decision was passed on to the Pentagon.

And then it didn't happen. The "why" will be argued about for years. The British forces had been processing their refugees at the nearby Barron Hotel, which described itself as "the most secure and comfortable hotel near Kabul airport." Indeed, there were five manned towers on the hotel grounds, but after being processed at the hotel, most of the refugees then made their way on foot to the Abbey Gate, adding to the confusion.

On the morning of Aug. 26, the British Embassy sent an email to Afghans, saying that because of security threats they should not make their way to the gate. The email was poorly worded, and it wasn't clear if this applied to just non-approved Afghans or to everyone.

The American plan was to close the gate in the afternoon, but the closure was reportedly delayed because the British were waiting on some last busloads of refugees. (The British have denied this, saying the refugees could have been routed to other gates.)

Whatever the reason, the gate was still open shortly before 6 p.m. That's when an Afghan man made his way toward the Marines' checkpoint. He waited until he was asked for his papers, as close as he could get to the Americans, before he detonated his suicide vest. Within seconds, the streets were soaked in blood and body parts. In the ensuing mayhem, gunfire rang out, adding to the body count. No one was sure if the gunfire came from Americans protecting their wounded, the Taliban, or other armed actors.

It didn't matter. This was the "extreme casualty event" that the American military had feared since its arrival. Roufi was translating back at headquarters when he heard the distant explosion. Within a few minutes, he was rushed to a makeshift hospital to translate for doctors and victims. For about 30 minutes, he helped assemble and dress the American dead. Soon, Roufi was needed for the living. A Norwegian doctor grabbed him and brought him into a triage ward filled with the screams of wounded Afghans. Roufi and the other young soldiers weren't prepared for this kind of carnage. Some stepped outside the tent and puked before returning to help.

After a few minutes, a screaming Afghan woman came in carrying her one-year-old baby girl. She thought her baby was OK after the blast, but she kept bleeding from behind her ear. A nurse grabbed the baby and told the woman to wait outside. A doctor examined the child and identified a piece of shrapnel that was embedded in her skull. The doctor made a snap decision.

"She needs to be medevacked to Germany."

It fell to Roufi to counsel the mother. He found her wringing her hands outside the medical tent. "She needs to go to Germany," he told her.

The Afghan mother had never flown or been outside her own country – Roufi might as well have informed her they were taking her baby to Mars. Roufi told her she could go to Germany with her child. The woman's face filled with anguish.

"But my husband. He is still out there. I don't know what happened to him. He could be bleeding."

"Go with your kid," Roufi told her. "She needs you right now. The rest will work out."

The woman nodded. A nurse led the mother to her daughter. A little later, the mom and baby were led out to a medevac flight for a journey to a strange new world that might just save the child's life.

Roufi never heard what happened to the baby girl and her mother. Instead, he went back to work. For five hours, he translated for the wounded, his hands covered in the blood of his countrymen. A crying girl with a leg wound and blood in her hair asked Roufi if she could find her mother. A boy with his head swaddled in bandages did the same. Roufi went outside to a nearby tent, where terrified relatives awaited news of loved ones. It turned out the two kids were siblings, and Roufi brought in their mother. She cried as she moved from stretcher to stretcher. Roufi eventually realized all seven of the mother's children were in the hospital.

Some time after midnight, he made his way back to the 82nd Airborne's headquarters. He knew of a storage room with a few cots. He collapsed on one of them and fell into a deep sleep.

It took less than an hour before he began having nightmares.

FIRST LT. SHEKIB stayed in Kabul until the end. He flew home on one of the last flights, sleeping most of the way. On his first night back home, his wife gently asked him a question.

"What was it like?"

Shekib gave her a hug.

"Everything is different," he told her. "It's not the Afghanistan we knew."

Roufi left a day before the end of operations. But he didn't fly directly home. Instead, he caught a ride on a C-130 bound for Doha, Qatar, where his family was being processed before heading to the U.S. Some of his family still feared that somehow they would be deported back to Afghanistan. Roufi wanted to ease those fears and expedite their journey to America. He didn't have the energy to think of the country he was leaving behind again. Later, he'd have the reaction centuries of soldiers have had before him: "What was it all for?"

Before leaving on the last flight out of Kabul, Gen. Donahue told Mohlis, his Taliban counterpart, that no good could come out of the Taliban taking a rocket shot at the last American plane. He informed him that bombers, fighters, and drones were still lurking above. Mohlis understood. Donahue also reminded Mohlis to watch his back; American intelligence still suggested he was an ISIS-K target.

A few hours later, Donahue was the last American soldier to board the last plane out of Afghanistan. Somewhere in Kabul, Mohlis watched his longtime enemy depart his homeland. What he thought at that moment isn't known. What is known is that on Nov. 2 Mohlis was killed by ISIS-K while visiting Taliban soldiers at a Kabul hospital. He outlasted the Americans by 63 days.

THE OTHER NIGHT, Fazel Roufi's wife woke him up because he was crying in his sleep. Often, he dreamed of the children he met in Kabul. The babies being passed over barbed wire by their mothers. The 10-year-old boy separated from his family, and the little girl with shrapnel behind her ear. They all said the same thing, some in Pashto, some in Dari.

"Help me, Fazel. Help me."

He tried, but he could never reach them.

During the day, he dealt with survivor's guilt. A cousin he didn't save was recently shot in the leg by the Taliban. The man texted Roufi, asking, "Why didn't you get me out?"

Still, he didn't have much time to dwell on personal healing. There were now 24 family members depending on Roufi and Vanessa to help them negotiate English classes, Medicaid eligibility, and finding a place of their own. Depending on the week, a dozen or so of his relatives were staying at their house.

Somehow, Fatima, the youngest, was the first to find a job. She wanted to become a journalist, but selling cosmetics at the mall would do for now. She was already sending money back to Afghan friends who face a winter of hunger and uncertainty. Abdul, Roufi's lanky father, roamed the halls looking for things to do besides watching Afghan news on the satellite television. Roufi told him not to bother.

"Dad, you don't have to worry about Afghanistan anymore. You're here now."

But his father still worried as he wandered the house, making the adjustment from chain-smoking to vaping. A proud man, it stung when he failed his driver's test on his first try. He joked when a visitor asked if he ever thought that leaving Afghanistan was the right thing to do.

"Only every hour." But then he smiled. "I have my family here."

On Thanksgiving, the late-fall sun shone brightly in Fayetteville. Roufi and Vanessa – OK, mostly Vanessa and Roufi's sisters – were preparing two turkeys and traditional Afghan dishes for the family's first American holiday. The house was a montage of happy chaos: someone checking if there was enough Coca-Cola; a nephew asleep with his head resting against a foosball table; and another nephew, with giant round eyes, standing on a chair and smiling mischievously, as he bit into a giant pomegranate, the purple juice running down his face.

Food was served, including Roufi's beloved qabili palau. The table settled into a babble of English and Pashto. At one end of the table sat Roufi's mother, dressed in a traditional long white dress and headscarf. She didn't say much, but smiled with contentment.

Before dessert, everyone was asked to say something they were thankful for. Their answers were similar, but Abdul, the patriarch, said it best.

"A little while ago, we thought we might all be dead." He waited for Roufi to translate. Then he spoke again, breaking into a smile. "But here we are. We are all safe and together."

Eventually it was Roufi's turn. He wore a red Armani T-shirt and looked shy as he spoke in English.

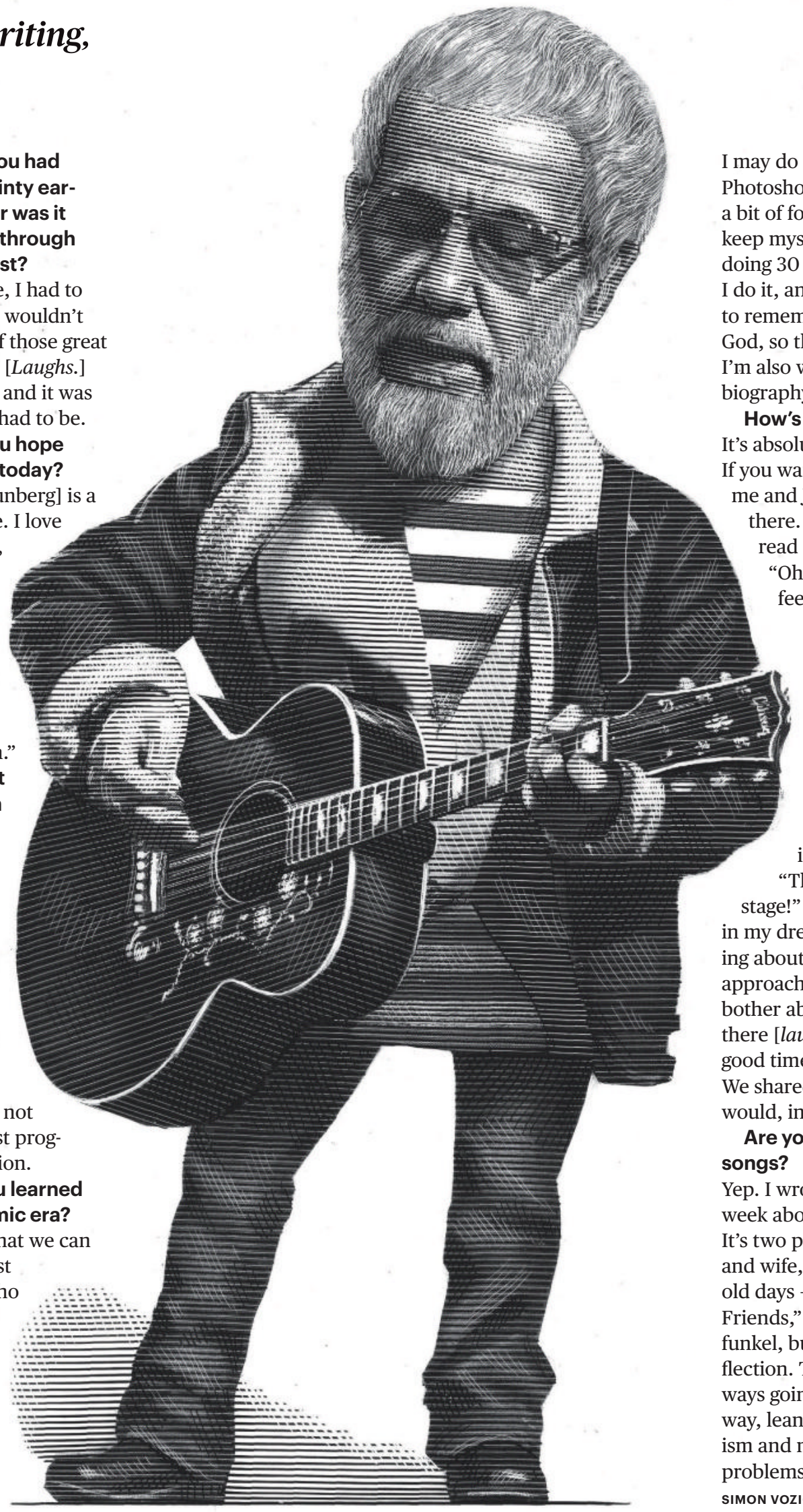
"For a while, I didn't think I was making a difference with my life. Just fixing trucks didn't seem like much to brag about. But then I was able to help bring my family here." He looked over at his wife across the table. "No matter what else happens, I was able to do this one good thing."

Roufi's mother's eyes filled with tears after the words were translated. Mother and son shared a look. Just as quickly, the table erupted again in conversation in two languages. Laughter filled the house.

Everyone was home.

Yusuf / Cat Stevens

The folk-rock seeker on songwriting, spirituality, and climate hope



What's the best advice anyone has ever given you?
I would have to go to the prophetic sources: "Leave that which makes you doubt for that which does not make you doubt." That means you have a calmness about you, and you can relax a little bit.

When you put it that way, it sounds almost easy.
You're right. It's not necessarily that easy. Sometimes you have to fight yourself, because your soul or your desire are pulling you one way.

> ***Yusuf recently reissued his 1971 album, 'Teaser and the Firecat.'***

You were writing about profound subjects at an early age. What led to a song like "The Wind"?
I'm talking to somebody; I think it's the divine, but I'm not quite sure, and because I'm not sure, it's universal. My goal was to be able to detach myself from my physical surroundings and material things. I was very earnestly searching. I would visit esoteric bookshops whenever I could, and pick up whatever new pathway to the truth I could find.

Many musicians have written songs about searching for God. You really followed through on that in your life.
I mean, Little Richard left music. He said it was the devil's stuff. Then he came back again. But, yeah – I did strive, not only lyrically, but mentally, spiritually, to attain the ideals of my songs.

Do you wish you had found that certainty earlier in your life, or was it necessary to go through the searching first?
Oh, yeah, for sure, I had to go through that. I wouldn't have written all of those great songs – come on! [*Laughs.*] It was important, and it was necessary, and it had to be.

What gives you hope about the world today?
I think Greta [Thunberg] is a great sign of hope. I love to see her talking, almost knocking these politicians down with her words. People are picking up on things and saying "I don't want this to go on."

You faced a lot of hostility when you first told people about your faith. Do you think the world has gotten any better at understanding Islam since then?
Well, we've got a Muslim mayor in London, so that's not bad. That's at least progress in one direction.

What have you learned from the pandemic era?
It's taught us all that we can change. I feel most sorry for those who were kept in their urban prisons – a one-bedroom flat somewhere. That's scary.

What do you do to relax?
I may do some art, get into Photoshop. I might watch a bit of football. I swim to keep myself fit. I don't enjoy doing 30 lengths a day, but I do it, and as I do so, I try to remember the names of God, so that keeps me afloat. I'm also writing my autobiography.

How's that going?
It's absolutely my whole life. If you want to know about me and Jimi Hendrix, it's in there. Some friends have read it, and they went, "Oh, my God. I don't feel as if I've lived!"

What do you remember about Jimi?
We were doing a tour [in the spring of 1967]. It was the first time he lit his guitar on fire. They were screaming at me, saying "There's a fire onstage!" I was too scared in my dressing room, thinking about how I'm going to approach my set, to even bother about going down there [*laughs*]. We had some good times together, as well. We shared a few puffs, as you would, in that purple haze.

Are you still writing new songs?
Yep. I wrote a new song last week about the climate. It's two people, a husband and wife, talking about the old days – a little like "Old Friends," by Simon and Garfunkel, but as a climate reflection. The songs are always going to be, in some way, leaning toward idealism and morality – and the problems that get in the way.

SIMON VOZICK-LEVINSON

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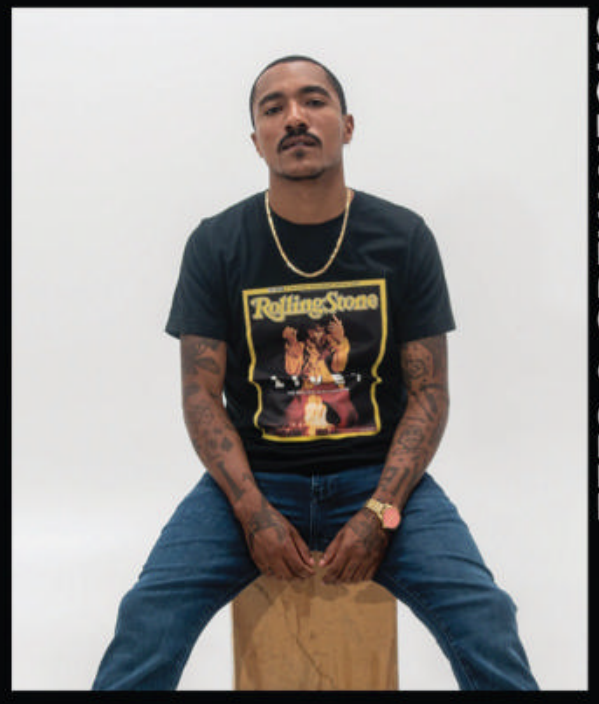

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